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'Beyond the one and the many.'

An exposition of the foundational commitments in the theology of Rowan Williams with particular reference to religious pluralism.

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‘Beyond the one and the many.’ An exposition of the foundational commitments in the theology of Rowan Williams with particular reference to religious pluralism.

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Abstract

In his paper, 'The Finality of Christ', Rowan Williams suggests that the fundamental commitments of Christian theology, as he understands them, do not fit easily with the standard responses Christians have made to interpreting religious diversity.

Exclusivism, pluralism and inclusivism all offer varying and competing maps with which to locate Christianity in relation to other religious traditions. Williams I would suggest takes a somewhat different approach, one that maybe understood as 'Trinitarian pluralism', which offers a theological understanding of the nature of plurality in which Christianity is not a system competing with other systems for the same space. It is precisely because of the nature of the scandalous particularity of Jesus of Nazareth that such an understanding can be put forward. My suggestion is that each of the traditional types harbour an anxiety. Exclusivists are concerned to protect the priority of Gods revelation, which requires the sovereignty and freedom of God to be that which determines all our theology. Pluralists are anxious to give due seriousness and equality to the empirical fact of religious diversity, which Christian assertions of uniqueness and universalism seem to undermine. Inclusivists seek a balance between the two and their anxiety is to find ways in which Christ can be 'found' ontologically, and not just epistemologically. The main part of my thesis will use these anxieties to articulate what Williams refers to as fundamental commitments. This will require an exploration of Williams' understanding of revelation in which he draws us constantly to the conflicts, ambiguities and contingent nature of history as being the only place for our speaking of revelation. As such he resists any revelation from either 'above' or 'below', which short-circuits our learning of that speech. I

shall then explore the Christology of Rowan Williams, in which what I call the 'primal wound of Christ' disturbs our religious language so radically that the Church can only offer the world that which it does not possess. Pneumatology, as Williams understands it, is not a way of overcoming the problem of distance between God and the world, but is that which draws us and incorporates us into the relation between Jesus and the one he calls Father. The Spirit is not a vague and generalized divine presence but that which can only be seen in the faces of the endless variety of Christians as they respond in their own particularity to Christ. In other words we shall lay out the foundations of Williams' Trinitarian grammar of God which shall then be brought together in the conclusion to offer a vision in which radical pluralism, which is the world, is not a threat or a problem, but an expression of the life of God who, as fundamental source of all that is, acts as both logos and spirit. The Church is essentially a space in which a new humanity is given freedom to take shape, but it is not and cannot be a space to be defended or expanded at the expense of others.

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Introduction

In this thesis I shall provide an exposition of the foundational theological commitments in the thought of Rowan Williams. I shall be doing so in dialogue with the established ‘exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism’ model for responding to the questions raised by religious diversity. That model is one which, as we shall see, Williams is deeply critical of. This thesis claims that to engage with Williams’ thought from this particular perspective offers a new articulation of his Trinitarian theology that specifically comments on the limits of the three-fold paradigm. This will require an exploration of the explicit commentary by Williams on questions of religious pluralism as well as mining material that lies further below the surface and which is found across his work. A synthesis of the various strands in Williams’ thought will be offered, which I have called ‘Trinitarian pluralism¹,’ that provides a fresh insight into his theology, which in turn helps us to re-imagine the questions posed by the world’s religious diversity.

To do this I shall, in Chapter one, explore the three types and attempt to articulate the nature of their own foundational commitments. Each type will be explored through the work of various key figures associated with it. The following chapters will be an exploration of Williams’ response to those questions and the anxieties they generate. Chapter two will show that the particular emphasis that Williams brings to his understanding of revelation does much to alleviate the disquiet of the exclusivist. For Williams, revelation is always *in* history and never above or below it, which in turn

¹ I acknowledge that this phrase is rather cumbersome and one that Williams himself might not find congenial. Its meaning will unfold as the thesis progresses. It should be noted that Kevin Vanhoozer also refers to William’s theology as being a form of ‘Trinitarian pluralism’. See Kevin Vanhoozer ‘Does the Trinity belong in a Theology of Religions’ in Kevin Vanhoozer (edit) *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*. (Eerdmans: Michigan, 1997)

means that we should recognize, without being paralysed by, contingency, conflict and change. Christian orthodoxy is *created* in the heat of fierce questioning that the data of a crucified Messiah generates. The endless spiral of originating events and ongoing hermeneutics essentially open up the Christian faith to the new and the other.

Chapter three will explore how the nature of God's revelation in Christ can be understood as what I shall call a *primal wound*. Divinity revealed in a dying man on a cross establishes a perpetual disruption to religious language. If Jesus Christ *is* whom Christianity attempts to embody, identify and reveal in inter-faith encounter then it does so because He is the resurrected stranger, the One who is never the Church's possession. This takes us in a different direction to the usual inclusivist prescription for how Christ is present beyond the life of the Church.

In Chapter four we trace how pneumatology in Williams' thought insists on resisting all forms of subordination of the Spirit to Logos. The distinctive work of the Spirit is the perpetual re-creation of the Logos in ever-changing situations, which in turn means the fullness of Christ can never be achieved in history. The Spirit has its own distinctive work in salvation, beyond that of Father and Son, but always in relation to them. The Spirit is not a generalised divine presence but the principle of Trinitarian unity, which offers a rather different picture of the universal activity of God than that which classical pluralists assume.

In the final chapter we move to Williams' 'Trinitarian pluralism' in which the various aspects of his thought help us to imagine and engage with that pluralism, which *is* the world. As such, a Christian understanding of radical diversity is offered, which seeks neither to ignore nor colonise it, yet at the foundation of this understanding remains the scandal of the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, who by his strange and disturbing

life and continued presence in the work of the Spirit enables us to see the face of God reflected in the face of the 'religious other.'

The One and the Many

A fox or a hedgehog? It would be intriguing to discover how Isaiah Berlin² might have characterised the thought of Rowan Williams, for it would be perfectly possible to make a case for either. Williams is clearly a person of immense intellectual curiosity, somebody who has written on an extraordinarily huge variety of subjects from a detailed investigation into the Arian controversy of the fourth century to the nature of poetry (as well as actually being a published poet). He has written twenty five books, given over two hundred and fifty academic papers and lectures as well as of course preaching countless sermons. So, perhaps the first point to be made is that Williams sees many things; the world for him is a place of profound diversity and difference. Like the fox, he has many things to say and as such, pays serious attention to the particularity and diverse nature of human life. On the other hand, commenting on the Christian theological and spiritual tasks, he writes in his first published book:

The problem was, is and will always be the Christian attitude to the historical order, and the human past [...] all 'meaning', every assertion about the significance of life and reality, must be judged by reference to a brief succession of contingent events in Palestine.³

So despite the diversity, there is nevertheless, running through the whole of Williams' writings, the 'hedgehog,' the generating centre of all else: the life, death and

²Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1953).

³ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1979; repr. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), pp. 11-12.

resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. That may seem contradictory, both a hedgehog *and* a fox, but if we continue the quotation from above we get a clue as to how these two aspects of Williams' thought co-inhere:

Christianity – almost without realizing it – closed off the path to 'timeless truths'. That is to say, it becomes increasingly difficult in the Christian world to see the ultimately important human experience as an escape from the transcendent, a flight out of history and the flesh.⁴

There is no flight outside out of history, which means there is no point outside of history by which we can see everything and judge it. If God has, in utter freedom, chosen to reveal Himself in the specific narrative of Jesus of Nazareth, then God encounters us in ambiguity, change and conflict—in history—and our theology is a perpetual engagement with this difficulty and the strangeness of the divine. In other words, the 'one' and the 'many' that his thought displays is not simply a matter of personal psychology but also of theological concern. As we shall see, for Williams, the God revealed in the scandalous particularity of Jesus Christ is One who does not wish to be *everything* but gives room to the *otherness* of his creation. This is not to say that there are areas of life that are beyond that of the gospel but rather:

The goal of a Christian life becomes not enlightenment but wholeness—an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre for God's creative work.⁵

⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵ *Wound* p.2

The difficulty in trying to summarise Williams' thought is exemplified in the biographies that have recently appeared on him. Each of them takes very different starting points and pathways into that thought. Mike Higton suggests that the theology of Williams is a response to *questions* such as, 'What difference would it [make] if I let myself believe that [...] I was held in a wholly loving gaze?'⁶ and 'What difference would it make if I believed each person around me to be loved with the same focus, by a love which saw each person's unique history, unique problems, unique capacity, unique gift?'⁷

These questions and the tensions between them are the source of conflict and the deep resistance in us all to that love, to our endless self-justifying constructions, and our relentless preference for self-deception and not truth and reality, either of God or ourselves. This is not, and for Williams cannot be, *systematic* theology because systems are part of the means by which we contain God and immunize ourselves against the One who reveals His freedom to us on the cross.

The God who reveals Himself in the crucified Jesus is the one who shows a gratuitous acceptance of us, a complete pouring, the cost of which is death and resurrection, into which Christians are baptized. As Bonhoeffer insisted and Williams concurs, it is therefore not a gospel of cheap grace, of easy consolation. For those who respond to Christ all there is (echoing Barth) is, 'a narrative of a 'journey into a far country' [...] a story of God's Son as a creature and a mortal and defeated creature.'⁸

For Higton, Williams' theology is not a form of systematics in a traditional sense; it is better described as a relentless exploration of this strange Christian experience of

⁶ Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel, The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM, 2004), p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 159.

God. Indeed, so intense is this exploration that for Highton there is the question of whether Williams so inhabits, in Barthian terms, the ‘no’ of the cross that the ‘yes’ falls too much into the background. It is not that Williams “has got the *shape* of the gospel wrong,” but rather that

The tenor or atmosphere of his writing is too unrelentingly *agonized* – too aware of the possibilities of self-deceit, too aware of the dangers of cheap consolation, ever to relax in the Sabbath rest of God’s love.⁹

It is certainly the case, as we shall discover, that on reading Williams the cross pierces our every thought and move and can leave us feeling paralysed. Yet this is in order to bring us to the reality of the God and of human relating and so prepare us for the inevitability of conflict and failure, the essentially *tragic* nature of human life.¹⁰ What Highton correctly draws our attention to is that the theology of Williams has at its core *spirituality*, which is to say that it involves the *transformation* of human life in the light of the cross and empty tomb.

Benjamin Myers¹¹ believes that Williams’ work falls into three broad periods. The earliest, from the 1970s to the late 1980s was one in which Williams’ thought was dominated by Wittgenstein’s exploration of the relation between language and sociality. This early encounter with Wittgenstein has ever since become foundational

⁹ *Difficult Gospel*, p. 36.

¹⁰ The tragic plays an important part in Williams’ thought, particularly in his engagement with the work of Donald MacKinnon; however, it is not an aspect of his theology I have the space to pursue in this thesis.

¹¹ Benjamin. Myers, *Christ the Stranger, The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

to Williams' theological vision, 'a commitment not to faith as an abstract system of ideas but to Christian sociality as a real, embodied pattern of life.'¹²

Myers goes on to suggest that a middle period can be traced from the late 1980s to the late 1990s in which there is a re-working of Hegel's philosophy, and particularly through its re-imagining in the works of Gillian Rose. She attempted to articulate a new understanding of Hegelianism that was to be found in what she called 'the broken middle.' This was to suggest that Hegel was not a thinker of synthesis but of opposition. Rejecting resolution, or synthesis, 'as though difference was an obstacle to be overcome',¹³ Rose suggests that we ought to accept the flawed 'middle' between differences, without seeking resolution. According to Myers, Williams transmutes this approach into a theology of identity, difference and sociality. Identity is always relational; it is mediated to me through the other and so 'otherness' and 'identity' emerge dialectically, instead of being fixed in advance. For Myers, Rose helped Williams to see that Hegel's dialectic 'is meant to challenge the all-sufficiency of the polarity of simple identity and simple difference'.¹⁴ This will become an important consideration in understanding the nature of inter-faith encounter.

From the 1990s Myers sees Williams engaging with Freud. Although very critical indeed of the father of psychoanalysis, according to Myers, Williams nevertheless finds much in Freud's work which reflects his own seemingly endless attempts to reveal human self-deception and fantasy, whilst at the same time finding in Freud's insights into human desire a powerful aid in re-interpreting the doctrine of the Trinity

¹² Ibid., p. 20.

¹³ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity' in M. Higon, ed. *Wrestling with Angels, Conversation in Modern Theology* (SCM: London, 2007), p. 29.

as “eternally restless, eternally unsatisfied desire”.¹⁵ Human desire generates idolatry, which is a kind of projection of the self into the middle distance in which what is seen is merely a distorted image of oneself. ‘God’ thus becomes an instrument of human power. Myers believes that for Williams there is a resonance between psychoanalysis and the apophatic whereby both attempt to strip away fantasies, images and idols all of which keep us bound in an illusory world. However, it would be a mistake to believe that Myers has successfully reduced and explained away Williams’ thought by locating it in three chronological periods. A brief look at the title headings of his chapters reveals why: ‘Tragedy’, ‘Desire’, ‘Hope’, ‘Renunciation’, ‘Writing’ all continue to point to the seemingly endless eclectic interests of Williams, so Myers suggests:

[Williams’] imagination is a room arranged with pieces from different places and periods. Ancient and modern, eastern and western, sit side by side in a colourful and provocative *mélange*, drawing the eye to novel and unexpected objects, never allowing it to rest on one item.¹⁶

Unlike Myers, I will not be exploring how Williams’ thought has been formed and influenced by the key philosophers and theologians mentioned above. The aim of this thesis is to highlight his theological commitments and how they help us to re-imagine the question of religious pluralism.

Rupert Shortt has written ongoing biographies of Rowan Williams, the last¹⁷ being a more detailed examination of the subject’s public career than the first. Shortt attempts to explain Williams’ theology through three categories: philosophy,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 107 Note these are Myer’s words and not those of Williams.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. xi.

¹⁷ Rupert Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule, The Biography of the Archbishop* (London: Hodder, 2014)

spirituality and politics. He agrees with Myers in seeing the influence of Wittgenstein, Hegel and Rose in being important conversational partners in Williams' ongoing theology. Self-displacement and the stripping away of the endless layers of our self-deceit are central to the spirituality of Williams, as understood by Shortt. The good theologian is the one who prays, and so as Williams says, 'Theologians like me know that their failures of understanding are actually failures of praying.'¹⁸ Theology is not a seminar on religious phenomenon; it is the opening up of the self to the Trinitarian life of God, in prayer and in community, and the learning of trust even in the face of apparent failure and emptiness:

Every Christian thinker, if he or she at all merits the designation, begins from the experience of being reconciled, being accepted, being held (however precariously) in the grace of God.¹⁹

Shortt highlights Williams' engagement with a key spiritual writer, St John of the Cross. *The Dark Night of the Soul* is a work by St John that has had a profound influence upon Williams. The *Dark Night* sweeps away all human constructions of God, whatever they may look like. What is experienced as God's withdrawal from us turns out to be in fact God's activity, for:

God will see to it by his action in our minds and hearts that we are peeled away from our attachment to ideas of him and ideas of ourselves. God will see to it that we are left with no idols to worship.²⁰

The *Dark Night* is the evacuation of meaning; perhaps one might say the collapse of the cataphatic. It is not an exalted 'mystical' experience, but rather the realisation that

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p. 12.

²⁰ Shortt, *Rowans Rule*, p. 100.

‘in the middle of all our religious constructs – if we have the honesty to look at it – is an emptiness. The Dark Night is God’s attack on religion.’²¹

Andrew Goddard has produced a book²² that is more straightforwardly biographical than that of Myers and Higton and so has a greater exploration of the political ramifications of Williams’ role as archbishop, especially in terms of the endless squabbles within Anglicanism. Goddard is himself an evangelical Anglican, and it would not be unfair to suggest his biography is an attempt to interpret and largely justify Williams’ theology and ministry to an evangelical audience. It does, however, raise yet another issue in trying to define the thought of Williams. Is he a liberal? Is he a conservative? Such labels have particular resonances within Anglicanism (particularly with regard to questions of women’s ordination and the nature of same-sex relationships.) For the purposes of this thesis such terms are not particularly helpful. Even though Rowan Williams does have a real openness to the encounter one may have with God in non-Christian traditions, which for some is a clear sign of liberalism, it is also clear, as we shall be seeing, that Williams is very critical of post-Enlightenment liberalism. In other words ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ are terms that may produce much heat but very little light.

Goddard’s book is, however, the only biography that devotes a chapter specifically to Rowan Williams’ understanding and approach to non-Christian religious traditions. He attempts to defend the orthodoxy of Williams in the face of what seemed to some in the Church to be a watering-down of Christian identity and truth, such as the Archbishop’s tentative support for the introduction of a limited amount of Shariah law for the British Muslim community. Such incidents may have hinted towards some

²¹ Ibid., p. 101.

²² Andrew Goddard, *Rowan Williams: His Legacy* (Oxford: Lion, 2013).

kind of religious relativism and pluralism, but Goddard is quite clear in his rejection of such perceptions. Rather, he suggests, Williams begins by dismissing a commonly-held view, that religion is a genus, of which the various religions are particular instances and that ‘all religious claims are answers to the same questions.’²³ They are in fact ‘holistic and relate everything to the “holy”’²⁴ and as such, they purport to ‘tell a truth which will comprehend any human situation it may encounter.’²⁵ As such, religions do not divide simply between those with the right answers and those with the wrong ones, nor is it possible to simply pool their answers to find a common basic truth. Engagement with the religious other must be an engagement with what they take seriously and the wisdom and humility to recognise that in dialogue you can see (non-Christian religious people) engage with the basic building blocks of their tradition and that you are in fact ‘looking at some else’s face turned toward God.’²⁶ Goddard’s interpretation of Williams’ theology of religious pluralism incorporates all three classical typologies. He sees Williams as being clearly exclusivist in his insistence upon the centrality and finality of the revelation of God to us in Christ. He sees him as an inclusivist in finding the presence of Christ in non-Christians, or to be more precise the ways in which non-Christians can paradoxically reveal Christ to us. He is a pluralist in that, taking seriously real difference in the various religious traditions, Williams sees in others the ‘gaze towards God’.

As Goddard shows, it is true that all three typologies can indeed be found in the pages of Williams’ work. What is not explored, but which is far more intriguing is how, for Williams, these three aspects relate coherently. There are two reasons for this. The

²³ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 224.

first is Goddard's limited use of the main sources for this chapter in the biography. It relies quite heavily on Williams' 'The Finality of Christ'²⁷. Goddard excavates just below the surface of this essay and draws from it material that supports what I would suggest is a cataphatic assertion of the uniqueness and finality of Christ, all of which is certainly to be found there. What he does not do is mine deeply enough, for that would have brought him to the much darker and more complex material with which Williams, in much of his writings, has been trying to give shape and form to. This material, which will be examined in more detail in later chapters, is the relentless struggle with which Williams tries to articulate the *strangeness* of the cross and resurrection. Secondly, Goddard does not refer to the engagement in Williams' thought with Raymundo Pannikar that offers a teasing glimpse of how the three typologies can be resisted and re-imagined by a robust Trinitarianism (see below).

There is also a collection of critical essays²⁸ written by various Australian theologians, who offer broadly sympathetic and affirming assessments of Williams' thought, with the exception of one, Tom Frame²⁹. However, Frames' critique is of Williams' attitude to the ethics of war and does not affect this thesis. The other authors will be referred to as we proceed.

There is then only a nascent body of published secondary literature on the thought of Rowan Williams. This thesis will contribute to that collection by examining how the question of religious pluralism focuses our attention on the way Williams deals with

²⁷ Rowan Williams, 'The Finality of Christ' in *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000)

²⁸ *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. by M. Russell, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009).

²⁹ Tom Frame, 'Rowan Williams on War and Peace' in *On Rowan Williams, Critical essays*, ed. by Matheson Russel (Oregon: Cascade, 2009), pp. 163-185.

Christianity's foundational commitments, which then leads to an understanding of his Trinitarian pluralism.

The Context of the Thesis

I will engage with Williams' theology from this point of entry for several reasons.

Firstly, as a former Chaplain at the London School of Economics, I spent a considerable amount of my time attempting to build up good inter-faith relations.

During this period, I encountered devout and impressive individuals from all the world's major religions. Attending Islamic prayer meetings, I often found myself wondering what the Quran, from a Christian point of view, actually was. Did it have any relation to the divine? Attending Hindu worship with a group of students, was I observing, as some Christians would claim, pure idolatry? Or could, as Pannikar suggests, one encounters the 'unknown Christ' in the *mysterium* of Hinduism?³⁰

Furthermore what, as a Christian priest, was the nature of my work in a secular institution in which the largest practicing religious body of students was usually the Islamic Society? An additional strain was added by the reluctance of the evangelically minded Christian Union to participate in any sort of inter-faith dialogue.

Secondly, it may have become something of a cliché, but it nevertheless remains true that we live in a global village, even beyond the walls of the L.S.E. Mosques, synagogues, temples and churches can be found at minutes walk from each other up and down the towns and cities of most western European countries including the United Kingdom. Cultures and religions sit side by side; it has been true for several generations that one no longer has to either travel or read a book to have a sense of India or Iran, one can see and taste in the sights and sounds of markets and buildings

³⁰ Raymundo. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: DLT, 1964).

that surround us the religious and cultural ‘other’. The world’s diversity is experienced in our midst like never before.

Thirdly, the questions which religious pluralism raise for the Christian are not external to its own self-understanding as though relations with and interpretations of other religions is best left to the ‘foreign office’ and have nothing to do with ‘home affairs’. As we shall see, fundamental to the theological conversations that the fact of religious pluralism raises are (amongst others) questions of revelation, Christology, pneumatology, natural theology, questions about history, as well as that of mission and evangelism. The ‘religious other’, if nothing else, sharpens the need for better self-understanding, a clearer articulation of what Christianity claims to be as it is confronted by that which it is not. As such, the questions raised by religious pluralism take us to the very heart of Christianity’s self-understanding, and so having them as a background reference point provides a particular way into the complex and dense theology of Rowan Williams.

Fourthly, as we have already noted, only Goddard offers any extended thought on how Williams perceives and responds to the question of religious pluralism, though others do refer to it. This thesis will, therefore, provide a much-needed synthesis of the various strands in Williams’ thought, which will provide not only an exposition of how he understands the pluralistic nature of the world, but in doing so will point us to the generating centres of his theological commitments.

The three typologies

There is both a universalism in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in that it recognizes and affirms the belief that God is present everywhere and in all people and that God

desires the salvation of all, yet there is also the New Testament claim that it is in Jesus Christ alone that this salvation is given. As the pluralist Alan Race comments:

Not even the most detached reader of the New Testament can fail to gain the impression that the overall picture of Christian faith which it presents is intended to be absolute or final.³¹

If the salvation of all people rests upon their response in faith to Jesus Christ then we are immediately presented with some very difficult questions, which are highlighted at the beginning of Chapter one. Christianity has responded to these questions with a variety of strategies. In 1983, Alan Race published *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.³² This seminal work suggested that the various responses could be grouped together in three types: pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism. These have become common, though not only, reference for those who reflect on issues of religious pluralism. Again, we shall explore each of them in the next chapter. Rowan Williams is, however, deeply unsatisfied with the three types that Christianity has produced. In the essay 'The Finality of Christ' he explores what we think we mean when speaking of Christ's universal significance in relation to systems of human meaning. He suggests that given the nature of the revelation of God in Christ, the task is not to construct:

Premature meta-theories of religion, but to explore how the identity of Jesus can in practice open and sustain converse with human schemes of meaning and draw them actively towards the reality of human community.³³

³¹ Alan Race, *A Christian and Religious Pluralism, Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 1983).

³² See above.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

For Williams we need to escape the text-book options prescribed for inter-faith dialogue, i.e. our three typologies. For in exclusivism, ‘all human meaning is to be found explicitly and solely in the person and work of Jesus’; thus in principle ruling out meaning. In inclusivist strategies ‘all human meaning is to be found ontologically in the Logos and virtually in Jesus,” which in effect makes a bid for ownership of all that is recognizable and acceptable in other traditions. For pluralists, ‘human meaning is accessible through a multitude of equally valid but culturally incommensurable symbol systems, among which the story of Jesus has its place’,³⁴ which, he suggests, allows for nothing more than unquestioning co-existence. Therefore for Williams, both our theological understanding of, as well as actual dialogue with other religious traditions must involve both a recognition of their otherness and integrity as systems, as well as a need to reflect on what as Christians we ‘*bring as our foundational commitment*’.³⁵ This will, in turn, require the creation of a synthesis out the various strands of Williams thought, which takes us well beyond the chapter written by Goddard, and which will then allow us to see how and why Williams can be understood as a Trinitarian pluralist.

The Elephant in the Room: Contemporary Perspectives

The questions pressing themselves upon Christianity by the presence of other religious traditions may seem contemporary. This, however, is clearly not the case. Christianity emerged in a pluralistic world. Its most immediate theological concern was to understand its own relation to the Jewish context from which it was born. Jesus was a Jew. For those who had come to recognize him as the Messiah and Son of God there was the immediate task of making sense of how and why he had been rejected

³⁴ *OCT* p. 95.

³⁵ *OCT* p. 95 (my italics).

by the very people who so desired his coming. The New Testament might be seen as a collection of writings that in their various ways attempt to articulate the ways in which the new covenant both fulfills and radically alters the old. Rowan Williams suggests:

In one way or another, practically all the writers [of the New Testament] are attempting to come to terms with the devastating finality of the life and death of Jesus. A finality, which on the one hand means that attitudes to the law and chosen people cannot ever be the same again, and on the other, leaves the believers with all the problems of living in a visibly untransformed world.³⁶

In other words, the earliest Christian communities had to understand themselves in relation to the Jewish context of their origins and find a language, which both recognized the continuity and radical discontinuity with that origin. As we shall go on to see, Williams also suggests that it is in the dialectical struggles for identity between the Jewish and the Christian communities that “somewhere, elusively, in this is that deeper and more unsettling point that might take us a bit beyond the clichés of inter-faith dialogue.”³⁷

What is more, as Christianity spread it also needed to engage and interpret the religious and philosophical world beyond the walls of the Temple. Paganism, mystery cults and perhaps above all the intellectual power of Greek philosophy had to be engaged with. What may well be novel in our cultural situation is not the fact of religious and cultural pluralism but the philosophical implications which are drawn from it. Harold Netland suggests

³⁶ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p. 14-15.

³⁷ *OCT* p. 97.

‘Philosophical pluralism’ is, an umbrella term that embraces a variety of contemporary positions that are united in their opposition to the idea that we can know objective truth e.g. ontological non-realism.....constructivism (‘reality’ is merely a construct of social experiences): perspectivism (we can never know reality as it is; the most we can know is reality from our own perspective); various forms of relativism (truth, rationality norms, and the like are all relative to, or internal to, particular contexts).³⁸

Religious traditions are particularly vulnerable to this contemporary relativism. The story of the elephant and the blind people helps us to visualise our contemporary cultural context. In it, a King sits and watches while an elephant is placed before his blindfolded courtiers. Each courtier reaches out and touches only one part of the elephant, but from the part that they have experienced they deduce the whole and claim to know what it is they are touching. The King, however, can see that each claim to the whole truth is actually limited and relative. The courtiers are groping around in the dark and know only some and probably not very much of the truth. Each of the courtiers represent a different religious tradition, the elephant is the mystery to which all aspire knowledge. Our cultural relativism can see that the claims made by any one religion to possessing the complete truth are obviously mistaken.

That story may have its origins in ancient India, but it has a very strong contemporary resonance. Rowan Williams, along with many who write on theology of religious pluralism, bring questions to the story:

I don’t think that religious relativism or pluralism will do, as this seems always to presuppose the detached observer (the one who sees the whole

³⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p. 19.

elephant); but neither can we expect to find a tribunal to assess right or wrong answers.³⁹

Williams is clearly critical of the claims of those who imagine that they can see what the rest of us are unable to. He would, I suggest, find common ground with those, like Daniel Strange who, wanting to dethrone the King, turn their attention to the elephant itself:

Knowledge of the elephant is only possible because the elephant speaks and tells us who he is. Without this self-disclosure, we may speculate, guess or dream, but we have no secure starting point for knowledge, we remain blind.⁴⁰

However, the difference between Strange and Williams is in what they understand the ‘elephant’ actually says. For Strange it is clear, definitive and absolute. For Williams, what is heard is far less conceptual and dogmatic. The elephant turns out to be in fact a child; one born in poverty and obscurity. As he writes in a sermon:

If God is with us as a child, he is certainly with us as one who calls out our tenderness and compassion, but he does so by an insistent presence without shame or restraint, crying and clutching. He is the God who, in St Augustine’s unforgettable words, penetrates my deafness by his violent, loud crying.⁴¹

It is precisely this difficult and strange gospel which Rowan Williams relentlessly draws our attention to that this thesis will attempt to articulate and to see how, in its light, it takes us beyond the one and the many.

³⁹ Rowan Williams, ‘Christian Theology and Other Faiths’, in *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christian and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur’an Together*, ed. by M. Ipgrave (London: Church House, 2004), p. 131.

⁴⁰ *Only One Way?* ed. by Gavin D’Costa (London: SCM, 2011), p. 98.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Not to Condemn the World’, in *A Ray of Darkness*, Cowley, Cambridge, 1995 p. 28.

Chapter 1: The Types Explored

In this chapter, I will explore the contours of the three typologies. It will not be an exhaustive account of the complexities and the many nuances that can be encountered in the literature in this field, but it will take us to what I believe is the core anxiety of each typology. We will then be in a position to explore the basic building blocks in William's own theological commitments in relation to those anxieties, to clarify why he does not share them and to put into place the foundations for a Trinitarian pluralism that moves beyond them.

Pluralisms

Prima facie, a pluralist interpretation of religion is the most obvious and compelling response to religious diversity, fitting most readily into our contemporary mindset. We clearly live in a world where there is an almost endless degree of religious diversity. The majority of people in the world is not Christian and probably has never been. If salvation comes only through the Christian Gospel, the statistics do not look very promising. For instance, a century or so of intensive Christian evangelism prior to Indian independence in 1947 had left only 2.4% on the entire sub-continent as Christian.¹ This raises some difficult questions for the claims that Christianity makes for itself, not least being that the God whom it proclaims is, we are assured, one whose nature is love, yet who seems to have restricted that love to rather contingent historical circumstances. Yet some Christians maintain that those who do not respond consciously to that love, found in Jesus Christ, are destined for damnation. But what could it possibly mean to say, for example, a Muslim born growing up in Mecca has

¹ Hans Kung, 'The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation' in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed. by J. Neuner (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), p. 27.

failed to accept Christ as Saviour and therefore is destined for hell? Until relatively recently, the world's great religions were mainly located in discrete geographical areas with the consequent implication that your religious identity (and subsequent possibility of salvation) depended upon a contingent geographical postcode.

What is more, it surely would be one who had deliberately turned a blind eye who could not see that the world's great non-Christian religions offer to their adherents a rich *totalitat*. Each provides a profound liturgical and prayerful life for them and that these traditions have the capacity to form and shape the moral character of people, offering an ethical structure to life, in which there is the demand to care for one's neighbour as well as oneself (the so-called 'golden rule'). Furthermore, other traditions certainly believe with the same conviction and integrity as Christians, that through their faith they are brought into a living relationship with the 'ultimate mystery of the universe', however that might be understood.

Does all of this not point to a radical pluralism in which it becomes increasingly difficult to support claims of the truth of one religion over another? Isn't it time for what John Hicks has called a Copernican Revolution (see below) in which the world's religions are given equal recognition as offering differing paths to the same ultimate Reality? It is notoriously difficult to define what 'religion' as a *genus* is, but whether we enter an Anglican Cathedral for Evensong, a synagogue for Yom Kippur, a Mosque for Friday prayers or a Hindu Temple for Divali there is surely, *prima facie*, a sense that what is going on is the *same sort of thing*. Given the empirical fact of the history and presence of enormous religious diversity, isn't the story of the blind men and the elephant very resonant indeed?

John Hick

John Hick is a recognized key figure associated with a pluralist approach to religion. It would, therefore, be appropriate to give an account of his foundational commitments as a way into a pluralist model of religious diversity. There are two key points of entry into his thought. The first being the gradual intellectual undermining of a conservative evangelical Christian faith that he had developed as a student after an intense conversion experience. Cracks began to appear with an increasing dismay at the narrowness of his Christian Union's attitude to non-evangelical theology and its rejection of questioning thought in general. Hick's academic career in philosophy and theology only served to widen and deepen the cracks to the point where he was both influenced by and became part of schools of theological and philosophical thought that had become increasingly sceptical of the legitimacy of the foundations of orthodox Christology. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this questioning was most vividly expressed in a collection of essays, of which Hick was the editor, published as *The Myth of God Incarnate*². Hick's own contribution was a chapter on Jesus and other religions, in which as the title of the book suggests, he re-imagined the traditional doctrine of the incarnation as being essentially mythological. New Testament scholarship had, for Hick, revealed how fragmentary and ambivalent our knowledge of the historical Jesus was, and how the proceeding generations of his followers had overlaid his identity with religious and philosophical presuppositions that were alien impositions. The Chalcedonian definition, for example, is a long way from 'anything that the historical Jesus can reasonably be supposed to have thought or taught.'³ The Fourth Gospel, which comes closest to affirming the divinity of Christ,

² *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. by John Hick (London: SPCK, 1977).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

is a late document, which was a ‘profound theological meditation in dramatic form’, rather than ‘history’, and so we cannot attribute the Christological sayings (‘I and the Father are one’ etc.) to Jesus of Nazareth.⁴ What, for Hick, the synoptic gospels present us with is a man who was intensely aware and responsive to the unseen presence of God, a presence which he was able to call Abba. If we had met him in the first century Palestine:

We would have felt the absolute claim of God confronting us, summoning us to give ourselves wholly to him and to be born again as his children and as agents of his purpose on earth.⁵

Such was the authority and intensity of Jesus’ relation with the one he calls Father, that we might have ‘felt that we are in the presence of God’,⁶ not literally, but in that here was somebody who was full of the divine life. However, over a period of time, the essentially poetic language that his followers used about Jesus became prose, so that language about divine sonship, which Hick sees as being a common trait in the ancient world⁷, was transposed from ‘son of God’, to ‘God the Son’. The fourth Gospel is primarily responsible for this shift, in which Jesus himself is the focus of his message:

In this gospel Jesus is the subject of his own preaching; and the church’s theology has largely followed the Johannine re-writing of this teaching. It is a

⁴ Ibid., p. 171.

⁵ Ibid., p. 172.

⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

re-writing; however, for it is striking that in the earlier, synoptic gospels Jesus' teaching centres not upon himself, but upon the kingdom of God.⁸

Nor can one call upon the resurrection as proof of Jesus' divinity. For though Hick does concede that there was some kind of experience in which Jesus was seen after his death, we cannot ascertain what that experience consisted of. Additionally, Hick suggests that the exaltation of a human figure to divine status was nothing new. He draws a parallel with the development in Buddhism of the Mahayana tradition, in which the historical figure of Gautama came to be seen as an earthly incarnation of the *Sambhogakaya*, a divine being to whom one can address prayer. Just as there are many earthly Buddhas, so there are many heavenly ones, 'but these transcendent Buddhas are ultimately all one in the Dharma (*Dharmakaya*), which is Absolute Reality.'⁹ So, just as the human Guatama came to be understood as the incarnation of a pre-existent Buddha, so also the human Jesus came to be worshipped as the incarnation of a pre-existent Logos, and 'in the Mahayana the transcendent Buddha is one with the Absolute as in Christianity the eternal Son is one with God the Father.'¹⁰ The *myth* which both these traditions embody is not to be reacted to as being either true or false, but rather what we are seeing is a 'tendency of the religious mind'¹¹ to evolve powerful and life-giving symbols and metaphors that place the believer in relation to Absolute Reality. For Hick, what he calls the religious impulse in humanity is real and serious and driven toward the experiential encounter with that Absolute Reality.

⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 169.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 169.

This is not the place to go into the finer and more nuanced details of Hick's New Testament hermeneutics, nor into his critique of the doctrinal development of Christianity. For the purposes of our thesis the point is that a pluralist response to religious diversity brings with it a *necessary* relativisation of the person and work of Christ, in which the story of Jesus of Nazareth becomes one more symbol system amongst a multitude of others.

The second key aspect of Hick's pluralist theological development was his experience working in Birmingham. Along with his academic work at the University he also was drawn into the complex world of community relations in a markedly multi-cultural city. The sheer *fact* of encountering and working with peoples of a great diversity of belief and practice very sharply raised the legitimacy of the claims Christianity made for its own uniqueness as he engaged with and recognized the legitimacy and authenticity of the religious other:

Attending worship in mosque and synagogue, temple and gurdwara, it was evident to me that essentially the same kind of thing is taking place in them as a Christian church – namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man.¹²

Both the academic and the experiential pointed to radical pluralism. The New Testament itself did not speak with one voice about who Jesus was, and Jesus himself never claimed to be God, a doctrinal move made centuries later by a Church that had been influenced and shaped by various non-Christian voices. The long and vivacious history and continued growing presence of other religious traditions spoke eloquently

¹² John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 17-18.

in itself of the need for cultural context and difference. Together, the academic and the experiential shifted Hick's religious outlook.

In 1973 he published *God and the Universe of Faiths*, in which he famously put forward two astronomical analogies for interpreting religious diversity. Ptolemaic astronomers understood the earth to be at the centre of the universe. Planets and stars that did not conform to this theory were postulated as 'epicycles,' which became evermore numerous and complex in order to account for the variations in the stellar movements. Copernicus provided a more coherent and demonstrably true explanation when he saw that it was the sun, rather than the earth at the centre of the solar system. For Hick, a theology of religious pluralism calls for such a radical new analogy. Out must go the old Ptolemaic view, in which Christ or the Church was at the centre of the universe of faith (exclusivism) and with it the epicycles (inclusivism) and instead the equivalent of the 'sun' be brought into the centre. As Hick puts it, we need:

A shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is God who is at the centre, and that all religions [...] including our own, serve and revolve around him.¹³

In this theological Copernican revolution Hick wants us to see that each of humanity's vast arrays of religious traditions and experiences are their own particular response to a transcendent divine reality, which itself is autonomous of all of them. However, he recognizes that (at least) two serious questions remain: what is the relationship between the traditions and what is the nature of the Mystery to which all religions are genuine but partial responses?

¹³ John Hicks, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 131.

To take the latter question first, the very difficulty of giving a name to the Mystery highlights the problem.¹⁴ *God* is an obvious starting point, but what of non-theistic traditions? Is the ultimate Reality at the ‘centre’ (or is it the edge?) of all things personal or non-personal? Hick’s response is to distinguish between ‘God’ and ‘God-as-perceived-by-humanity’¹⁵. ‘God’ (the absolute Mystery and Reality)

is neither a person nor a thing, but is the transcendent reality which is conceived and experienced by different human mentalities in both personal and non-personal ways.¹⁶

There is a fundamental distinction to be made between ‘God’ and the infinite and unknowable depths of that Mystery and that which is experienced by humanity. As such, the differing religious traditions are not *necessarily* competing and contradictory claims and experiences, but rather:

They are better understood as different phenomenal experiences of the one divine noumenon, or, in another language, as different experiential transformations of the same transcendental informational input.¹⁷

Hick here is drawing upon an analogous distinction in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, but transposing the distinction from sense perception to awareness of ‘God’. The mind interprets input from external reality according to its own categorical systems inherent in the structure of finite consciousness, so that:

¹⁴ Hick refers to the Mystery of the Transcendent in many ways. There has been an evolution in his terminology from *God* to Reality-centredness. However, other terms are sometimes used, including ‘transcendental information input.’ For convenience sake, when Hick refers to the absolute transcendental reality that lies behind and beyond all things, I shall use the word ‘God’- in parenthesis.

¹⁵ This is my own paraphrase of Hick’s thought.

¹⁶ Hick, *God has many names*, p. 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

All that we are entitled to say about the noumenal world is that it is the unknown reality whose informational input produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience.¹⁸

Hick also draws upon Aquinas to support this view, ‘the thing known is in the knower according to the knower’¹⁹. This is to say that our knowing is not a passive receiving of what is ‘out there’, but rather what is external to the knower is constructed and interpreted in ways already existing in the knower. To translate this into the terms of Hick’s religious pluralism, the apparent contradictions of the world’s religious traditions can be accounted for because of the cultural and historical setting of each tradition filtered through the limitations of human understanding. The religious impulse that is to be empirically seen running through human cultures constructs images of ‘God’, and the plurality of those images arise from the *sitz-im-leben* that any particular culture affords. The variations in the cultural situations (agrarian, industrial, desert, mountainous, hot, cold, tribal, rich, poor, etc.) together with the limited nature of finite human consciousness inevitably leads to the particular and relative reification of ‘God’ and cannot be otherwise. Hick acknowledges that we have to accept that ‘God’ is only knowable insofar as the Divine impinges upon human awareness and response, but remains unknowable in itself.

Thus, the contradictory claims made by the world’s religious traditions are not quite what they seem. For instance, one of the most basic apparent clashes in religious pluralism, the one between the personal monotheism of the West and the non-personal traditions of the East, can be accounted for by two reasons. Firstly, he notes that the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 49 (Summa Theologica, 11/11, Q.1, art. 2).

personal is always a relational term, 'it is always a function of community.'²⁰ As such one cannot be a person in isolation and whilst a personal God truly tells us something of 'God' in that 'God' is the 'ground, or creator, or source of personal life',²¹ such language and understanding cannot apply to the infinite and eternal existence of 'God' *a se*. Secondly and following on from that point, that Reality which is 'God' is in 'God-self' beyond what appears to us as contradiction; as Hick asks, 'why should [the personal and non-personal] be incompatible in the infinite?'²² As such the blind men 'were all true, but each referring only to one aspect of the total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies'.²³ Both the personal and the non-personal, which 'God' both incorporates and transcends is why in his later writings Hick refers to 'God' as 'Reality'.

The various religious traditions of the world are relative to their own cultural context and their mythological language makes sense and offer a true experiential encounter with 'God'. However, Hick does wish to avoid the obvious pitfall of such relativism, 'If we think for a moment about the entire range of religious phenomena, no one is going to maintain that they are all on the same level of value or validity'.²⁴ Hick offers a model for assessing and indeed, to use his own word, 'grading' the world's faiths. A case for doing so is justified by the various traditions themselves, which have a constant history of being critiqued by their own key religious figures. Such a critique is also sanctioned by Hick's detection of a common fundamental theme within the diversity of the religions that permits comparison, for they

²⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

²¹ Ibid., p. 108.

²² John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 37.

²³ Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 140.

²⁴ Hick, 'On Grading Religions', *Religious Studies*, 17 (1981), p. 451.

exhibit a common structure, which is soteriological in the broad sense that it offers a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better one.²⁵

The world's religions begin with a sense of the inadequacy of the present state of human existence – *sin*, *maya* etc. They also proclaim the possibility of a new and limitless existence; salvation or liberation 'comes about in the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness'.²⁶ This basic movement is one upon which each tradition builds an intellectual system that interprets 'the meaning of the vision in terms of the concepts and styles of thinking available within their own cultural situations'.²⁷ That cognitive structure, for Hick, is mythological and culturally relative. What is not relative and which takes us to the common core at the heart of the world's religious pluralism is the encouragement to turn away from Self towards 'God', to 'Reality', which is a movement based upon love and compassion for the whole of humanity. This is religion's glory and its hope. One may, to a limited extent, therefore, have a means to make judgments about the salvific effectiveness of a religion, at particular moments and in specific instances.²⁸ However, one is not able to judge a religion in its entirety for that may only occur eschatologically. Before then the distinctive claims of any one religion are allowed to stand, but only within their own context. Jesus *is* the Son of God *for* Christians, Mohammad *is* the Seal of the Prophets *for* Muslims and so forth. Yet all such claims must also be recognized for what they are – mythological. The 'God' to which they gaze remains hidden and inaccessible.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 452.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 453.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 453.

²⁸ The crusades for instance failed, at that moment, to embody the movement to Reality, as do presumably, terrorist attacks by Islamicists.

Paul Knitter

Hick was a protestant theologian. We shall now explore something of a pluralist approach to religious diversity through the thought of a Roman Catholic writer, Paul Knitter. Knitter agrees with much of the basic stance of Hick; that is, we can no longer think of Christianity as being at the centre of truth and salvation (exclusivism), with other religions standing in varying degrees of legitimacy to it (inclusivism). The overwhelming fact and universality of religious otherness in an increasingly globalised world calls for a radical openness to that diversity. However, in his latter writings, particularly *Jesus and the Other Names*,²⁹ Knitter has been greatly influenced by the liberation theologians of Latin America, by the increasing awareness of our ecological predicament and by the importance of science. Together these concerns and influences have led him to replace Hicks 'Reality' and 'theocentricism', with a liberationist account of religion. All religions are to be judged in their efficacy in bringing salvation by their ability to bring about the 'kingdom', a state of affairs characterised by peace, justice and righteousness in both our personal relationships and in the socio-economic-ecological structures of the world. Knitter does not see the 'universal' in terms of an essential common theological core that all religions share. It is rather that suffering and the ecological are that which religions are responses to and so for him it these points which offer the site for inter-religious dialogue and commitment. Two pressing questions then shape theology; that of the many poor and that of the many religions. Whatever we believe must, if not answer, at least help us deal with these two primary questions. As such Christian theology must be liberative (showing us how the message of Jesus enables us to understand and respond to injustice) and dialogical (a theology which promotes and is re-interpreted

²⁹ Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names* (New York: Orbis, 1996).

by interfaith encounter). For Knitter, the symbolic nature of Christian Trinitarian language reveals a God in whom, with the world, there is a mutual indwelling. 'It's a two-way relationship; the world exists in God, but also, and just as truly, God exists in the world.'³⁰ There is a dynamic, co-relational and open-ended interacting of matter, humanity and the divine. As such, Knitter finds *creation ex nihilo* unsatisfactory, offering a 'God out there', rather than a non-duality between God and the world. Evolution, Knitter suggests, confirms such a view, as it reveals a universal process in which God creates not 'from above', but 'from within'. God is the dynamic and creative principle that brings order from apparent chaos. Knitter goes as far as to say that evolution provides a foundational narrative within which all religions can find their place. Science provides a 'transcultural religious story', 'providing all religions with a common creation myth'.³¹ The place of Jesus in such a theological vision is illustrative rather than constitutive, for along with others he reveals the dynamics of the divine and the universe.

Exclusivisms

Exclusivist approaches to non-Christian religions take as their most fundamental foundational commitment that it is God who addresses us. The gospel is something that comes to us as gift; it cannot be a possession or something we can earn. It can never be something that we make for ourselves. This 'God-centred', rather than 'human-centred' theology is associated with the work of Karl Barth. Most exclusivists draw upon his thought as a basic resource, though they often move away from some of his conclusions. Barth was at the vanguard of a reaction against the influence of

³⁰ Gavin D'Costa, Paul F. Knitter and Daniel Strange, *Only One Way? Three Christian Responses to the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World* (London: SCM, 2011), p. 55.

³¹ Knitter, *Jesus and the other Names*, p. 119.

liberal protestant thought which, it was claimed, had turned Christian revelation upside down, with the human reaching out to the divine. For Barth this was nothing more than anthropology, human language referring to itself. As he says:

(God) was in danger of being reduced to a pious notion; the mythical expression and symbol of human excitation oscillating between its own psychic heights or depths, whose truth could only be that of a monologue and its own graspable content.³²

For Barth, theology is founded on revelation and thus the utter priority of God; all knowledge of God comes from God and from this all truthful knowledge of ourselves as creatures. Theology that does not begin and continues to be sustained by this divine self-disclosure is really an elevation of the human. The revelation of God must, therefore, mean the revelation God gives of Himself; no human thought can reach up to God and bring him down. We can know God only if God enables our human response to be formed by God's revelation of Himself.

So what is revelation? For Barth it has a three-fold character. The first and primary form is the self-revealing presence in Jesus Christ, who is fully human and fully divine. The Incarnation is not a piece of information one can learn, but is an event that one must respond to. That response is faith, which itself, though a human act, comes as divine gift. If we could, simply out of our own spiritual discernment, recognize the revelation of God in Jesus that would be tantamount to the priority of the human over the divine. All human constructions, political as well as religious, non-Christian and indeed Christian are to be judged through Jesus Christ. The point being that it is not 'Christianity' with all of its institutional trappings that is true; it is rather the gospel of

³² Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. James Strathearn McNab in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, ed. by Clifford J. Green (London: Collins, 1989), p. 48.

Christ, which is the judge of all things, including (and perhaps especially) Christianity itself. For Barth:

The essential, absolutely unique feature in the revelation of God in Christ is that, contrary to all human conceptions, God's revelation is an offence to man.³³

For what has been revealed in the man Jesus is not an idea about God, or a message from God, but God Himself; the self-disclosure of God is the stumbling block, and folly of the crucified Christ. As such, God's revelation in Christ, according to Biblical realism is therefore not only a revelation of God, but also of man.³⁴

In the cross God shows His outpouring love for us, and through the same cross, humanity shows its blindness and resistance to that divine love. Revelation is therefore dialectical; as Barth claims there is both a 'yes' and a 'no' given to us in Jesus, neither of which simply follow on one from another, but are simultaneous because they are a relation. In the very acceptance (through grace) of the truth that God acts for our salvation comes also the recognition that human beings, in their utter sinfulness, are unable to help themselves; we are creatures who are fundamentally marred, causing us to be enemies of God.

The second form of revelation, which is utterly dependent upon the first, is the Bible. It is not that the books of the Old and New Testaments were dictated by God and now simply need be learnt and repeated. That would make of God's revelation of Himself

³³ Ibid., p. 70.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

an object under our control, something essentially static that would allow for human domestication. For Barth, the Bible is utterly human and the words of the text of Scripture are not to be identified with revelation; they become revelation when God chooses them to reveal Jesus Christ - they become God's Word in that revelation. Thirdly, revelation is the proclamation, the preaching of the Gospel that is fundamental to its very nature and which, like the Scriptures themselves, is an indirect channel of the divine Word. Both are human witnesses to the divine disclosure; neither are able in themselves to be revelation; both become so through the grace of God.

For Barth then it is impossible for man to hear the Word of God, 'but it is an impossibility revealed to man by that very Word'.³⁵ The three-fold nature of revelation has as its primary event the Word which is Jesus Christ Himself. Scripture becomes the Word only in fidelity to Christ, preaching becomes the Word in fidelity to Scripture. The written Word and the proclaimed Word are a two-fold relation by which we are addressed, but *revelation* is the Word of God itself in 'the act of being spoken in time'.³⁶ There is, therefore, a plurality in the 'oneness' of revelation in which each of the three terms is defined in and through relation to each other and in that relation they are identical. This of course is Trinitarian language as Barth goes on to say:

There is only one analogy to this doctrine of the Word of God. Or, more accurately, the doctrine of the Word of God is itself the only analogy to the

³⁵ Rowan. Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God', in *Wrestling with Angels*, ed. by M. Higon (London: SCM, 2007) p. 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

doctrine which will be our fundamental concern as we develop the concept of revelation. This is the doctrine of the trinity of God.³⁷

For Barth, that ‘God reveals Himself’ is by its very nature Trinitarian.

In his later writings, Barth began to emphasise the ‘humanity of God’. As Alan Race puts it ‘the shift in Barth’s thought is towards a greater emphasis on God’s “yes” and away from the polemical approach of his former period’.³⁸ There is a greater exploration of the relation between the divine and the human as encountered in the person Jesus Christ. For Barth, the humanity of God still meant God’s approach to us and not the other way around. However, in his earlier theology the emphasis had been on the divinity of God:

By this I mean that property of God which in his relation to humanity and to the world is absolutely his own [...] it is that mystery, comparable only with the impenetrable darkness of death, in which God veils himself at the very moment when he unveils himself to humanity, makes himself known, reveals himself.³⁹

In other words the thrust of his powerful anti-liberal polemic remains – God is God. However deep that truth is, it must not and cannot be made at the expense of God’s humanity, which had been ‘moved from the centre to the margin, from the emphatic

³⁷ CD 1/1p. 121.

³⁸ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism, Patterns in the Christian theology of religions*. (London: SCM, 1983), p. 15.

³⁹ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. James Strathearn McNab in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, ed. by Clifford J. Green (London: Collins, 1989), p. 40.

principal clause to the less emphatic subordinate clause'.⁴⁰ Ironically the emphasis upon the totally 'other' nature of God had dislocated Him from the scriptures, for:

In the isolation, abstraction and absolutism in which we viewed [him] and opposed [him] to humanity [...] it still had or required greater similarity to the divinity of the God of the philosophers than to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁴¹

Yet the God of the Bible is a *living* God whose divinity has 'its meaning and power only in the context of his history and his dialogue with *humanity*, and therefore in his *togetherness* with humanity'.⁴²

It is in God's relation to us that divinity is encountered, not in our pondering of God in the abstract. God comes to us, reveals himself to us as the *living God*, and indeed the freedom in which he does that is his divinity.

The justification for this move in Barth's theology is generated by his Christology. In Jesus Christ we neither encounter an abstract humanity, nor an abstract God, but rather in the one human person Jesus from Nazareth, the living God is encountered. Jesus acts for humanity before God and for God toward humanity, he guarantees God's free grace to us all, but also attests to humanity's right before God. What it means to talk about God and what it means to talk about humanity must be in and through Jesus Christ:

Who and what God is in truth, who and what humanity, we have not to explore and construct by roving freely far and near, but to read it where the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴² Ibid., p. 52.

truth about both dwells, in the fullness of their union, their covenant, that fullness manifest in Jesus Christ.⁴³

It is not that God needs humanity. It is rather that God, *in his freedom*, takes the initiative and gratuitously brings us into partnership with Him and this is the mystery of Jesus Christ: 'In this divinely free willing and choosing, in this sovereign decision (in this decree, as they used to put it), God is *human*.'⁴⁴

So, as in his earlier theology, Barth steadfastly holds on to the absolute 'otherness' of God. However, this qualitative distance is not an abstract one, but is *encountered* in God's relation with the world, so that 'the darkest threats of judgment in the Old Testament, prophets are uttered only in the context of the history of the covenant founded by Jahweh'.⁴⁵ Barth thus makes central in his later works the relational and decisive nature of the Incarnation, which for our purposes has three implications. Firstly, even though there is a change of tone in this theology, it is not a fundamental change in content. Christ and Christ only is the way to salvation. All other religious traditions are human constructions and soteriologically void. Barth remains an exclusivist.

Secondly, Barth does not deny that God has revealed Himself outside of Christ; as Clifford Green points out:

⁴³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

This misreading would mean that God was imprisoned by the earthly life of Jesus, and that God's grace and spirit were confined to a brief time and a narrow space.⁴⁶

It is rather that the self-revelation of God in Christ sets the terms by which we can recognize God's revelation in all times and places; 'it defines the nature of the universal inclusiveness of God's grace in Jesus Christ'.⁴⁷ This is not an acceptance of 'natural theology' but an emphasising of the Christological priority in all things.

Thirdly, and following on from the previous point, there is an open-endedness in his mature works, which point towards some form of universalism (that all people, despite their faith or lack of it, will be saved in Christ.) He suggests that we should be 'spurred on' by Col. 1.19 in which we are told that God reconciles *all* things to himself in Christ and concludes a passage reflecting on universalism saying:

One thing is sure, that there is no theological justification for setting any limits on our side to the friendliness of God toward humanity that appeared in Jesus Christ – it is our theological duty to see and to understand that as even greater than we had done before.⁴⁸

It is precisely at these points that Barth parts company with other forms of exclusivism.

Daniel Strange

Daniel Strange is an Anglican theologian who powerfully articulates a conservative evangelical approach to other religious traditions and which refutes Barth's

⁴⁶ Green, *Karl Barth, Theologian of Freedom*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

universalism. Strange begins his theology of religious pluralism by recognising and acknowledging that it is already positioned, it is a ‘tradition-specific perspective’.⁴⁹ This for him is not to make his position relative to others, making it one more option amongst many, but is to see that any positions taken are tradition-specific and that they cannot be otherwise, for ‘all positions that claim to be true and privileged are “exclusive”’.⁵⁰ The place where the king sits in our initial story does not exist; all theological and indeed philosophical arguments emerge from within traditions and do not exist outside of them. This does not of course establish the truth of Strange’s own theology as such, but does establish his right to argue it as true. The veracity of his theology itself is, for Strange, one based upon the self-attesting God who reveals himself supremely in Jesus Christ. As a conservative evangelical Strange summarises his theology of religions as:

From the presupposition of an epistemologically authoritative biblical revelation (itself presupposed on the self-contained ontological triune God who speaks authoritatively), I will argue that non-Christian religions are essentially an idolatrous refashioning of divine revelation, which are antithetical and yet parasitic on Christian truth, and of which the gospel of Jesus Christ is [the] subversive fulfilment.⁵¹

His position is argued very conceptually and can be summarised in the following way.

First, Strange establishes the self-attesting and self-sufficient nature of God. For him the fundamental confession of the Old Testament is God’s self-description as ‘I AM WHAT I AM’ (Exodus 3.14). What is revealed here is that God is both ‘distinctively

⁴⁹ D’Costa and others, *Only one Way?* p. 93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵¹ D’Costa and others, *Only One way?* p. 93.

a personal absolute and absolute personality'.⁵² God is both utterly transcendent and yet not wholly other to creation and truly immanent, yet not identical to creation. This living God speaks and reveals Himself and is one in whom creatures can have a covenantal I-Thou relationship. This is not, however, the god of philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Second, God has created human beings in his image, which can never be erased, yet which has nevertheless become fundamentally distorted through the Fall and Original Sin. Strange then sees the blurring of the Creator/creature relationship as emerging out of idolatry. Idolatry is not just the raising of objects to the level of the divine, but also the raising of ideas and beliefs. Idolatry is a false faith in which the true God is brought under human control and human beings raise themselves to a pseudo divine position. It will be under the category of idolatry that Strange will:

Interpret all beliefs/worldviews (both those demarcated as 'religious' and those not) that do not cohere with God's own revelation of himself, including all 'other religions'.⁵³

Third, despite the Fall and the disastrous idolatrous tendencies it leads human beings to, because of the *imago dei*, God still graciously reaches out to humanity through general revelation. However, this is more than our contemplating philosophical questions about a First-cause; it is the biblical notion which has a much more personal nature. Strange affirms that in this divine initiative of general revelation:

God's deity and eternal power are evident; they overwhelm man; they strike him suddenly, in moments when he thought they were far away. They creep

⁵² Ibid., p. 104.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 112.

up on him; they do not let go of him, even though man does his best to escape them.⁵⁴

The image of God residing within them means that human beings retain receptivity to general revelation. Original sin on the other hand constantly suppresses and distorts that receptivity. Strange affirms that:

This repression occurs so immediately, so spontaneously with understanding a perception that at the very same moment he sees, he no longer sees, at the very moment he knows, he no longer knows.⁵⁵

What is more, the suppression leads to substitution; general revelation is not totally obliterated but is corrupted and twisted and made to be something else. Thus like Calvin, Luther and Barth, Strange would describe human nature as a perpetual factory of idols. General revelation enables individuals to be grasped existentially by the Creator and reveals to them their creatureliness, but it does not reveal to them God the Redeemer. Indeed, even if general revelation was salvific, ‘no-one would avail themselves of it due to their sinful natures.’⁵⁶

Four, the universal depth of human sin makes absolutely necessary Christ’s penal substitution in the provision of salvation, for the doctrines of original sin and total depravity articulate the universal reality of the human condition. And so ‘underlying this grim reality is the basic truth that God’s justice requires the punishment of sin and

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

⁵⁶ Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 268.

sinner'.⁵⁷ It is through the particularity of Christ's saving work that this wrath has been dealt with. Fundamental to this is the realisation that the work done is God's work, not ours and it comes as sheer gift and cannot in any way be achieved by human effort.

Five, for Strange the faithfully biblical and indeed logical implication of this is given the absolute objectivity of redemption it does not depend on human subjectivity to bring about its efficacy, for that would make salvation dependent upon us and not God. As he states:

The 'penal' model is a totally objective model; that is, it does not make salvation merely possible, but accomplishes and secures it with the Holy Spirit applying its benefits to the believer.⁵⁸

It is, in other words, monergistic, which is to say that God and God alone is not only the cause of salvation but the ground of its human reception; it is in no way a joint enterprise.

Six, the question of the salvation of the unevangelised has been misunderstood. It is not to do with those who have never heard the Gospel through no fault of their own, or those who are invisibly ignorant:

For all are spiritually guilty and that while there are degrees of light and responsibility, everyone has spurned the light they have, whether this be the light of general revelation or special revelation.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 267.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 278.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 282.

Seven, even though for Strange there is clearly a universality in the gospel, it is to do with the belief that God has not only ordained the way of salvation, but also the means through which this Gospel is to be proclaimed and that is through the human messenger. The Church has been commissioned to proclaim this Good News.

The consequences of these foundational commitments for Strange mean that it is not 'faith' as some general human quality that saves; it is faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed to be more exact, it is, as he says, not faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. Strange recognises the inextinguishable image of God residing in human persons, causing an existential restlessness in them for the one true God, but human sinfulness suppresses and twists such movements in an idolatrous fashion. This is both the 'yes' and the 'no' of non-Christian traditions. But that restlessness, that religiosity, is not to be understood as in any way pointing to the real Christ, 'as though He were the satisfying answer to humanity's religious quest'.⁶⁰ For Strange, Christianity is the subversive fulfilment of other religions. He suggests that rather than beginning with the question of soteriology in other religions, one should ask, 'If we are to think God's thoughts after him, what is human religion in God's sight?'⁶¹

For the Christian, the self-revealing God has answered that Himself: non-Christian religions are essentially 'an idolatrous refashioning of divine revelation'.⁶² Jesus Christ in this scheme is the 'subversive fulfilment'⁶³ of other religions.

Inclusivism

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 282.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 129.

⁶² Ibid., p. 109.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 110.

We noted above, that in the tension and relation between the two axioms of (i) God's universal desire to save all people and (ii) the disclosure of that love in the scandalous particularity of Jesus, pluralists prioritise the former axiom and exclusivists the latter. Inclusivists believe that both maybe held together, without contradiction, but only because of the nature of the second axiom. Such is the nature of the person and work of Christ that the salvific effects brought about by him that they exceed the epistemological. For inclusivists Christ is present ontologically in other religions, though how that is the case varies amongst them.

I shall now explore the inclusivist paradigm through the work of Gavin D'Costa. He will be my only interlocutor in this category as in the evolution of his thought his inclusivism shifts from a 'Rahnerian' stance to a 'tradition-specific' stance. As such, tracing that movement covers much of the ground of various approaches which inclusivists adopt.

In *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, published in 1986, D'Costa presents a case for inclusivism based upon the foundational work of Karl Rahner. Key to Rahner's thought was the concept of 'Vorgriff', which D'Costa translates as 'pre-apprehension.'⁶⁴ As I type this paragraph on my computer keyboard, I do so because I am aware that it is this specific thing that I am using; it is not for instance a daffodil. The human capacity to differentiate between things (keyboards and daffodils) enables linguistic reference and is the condition which in objectifying them makes them known as particular objects (*this* keyboard, not a daffodil.) However, this capacity contains within itself the implicit recognition of contingency, 'the truth that things are as they are but might have been otherwise, is in the same moment to understand the

⁶⁴ D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, p. 81.

entirely open-ended potential of being itself".⁶⁵ Rahner suggests that this specific knowledge in which the intellect discerns difference and particularity requires that we have a 'pre-apprehension' of knowing which is related to the possibility of unlimited being. In recognising the 'being' of this keyboard, there is contained within that apprehension an implicit recognition that 'being' is more than 'this' or 'that' thing, for there is always something more, 'for the readiness to affirm the being *of* beings and its inexhaustibility discloses that the human mind is structurally orientated to a horizon or backdrop of being'.⁶⁶

Thus *Vorgriff* is the pre-apprehension of unlimited possibility and ultimately of the very ground of existing, *esse*, being itself. We cannot grasp *esse* abstractly, it can only be thought in relation to particularity, though as Williams points out, it is conceived in the act of abstraction, so that the 'Vorgriff of *esse* is a pre-apprehension of God – not as an object, but as the condition for grasping all objects'.⁶⁷ Rahner is thus making a transcendental claim about our knowing, which moves from the given nature of experience to the condition of *knowing's* possibility. That possibility forms the basis of an unrestricted and limitless 'Being' that Rahner argues is our orientation to God. Hence, for Rahner, there is a transcendental revelation that forms the structure of human knowing which is pre-reflective and pre-apprehending 'Vorgriff.' God, who is Absolute Being is also Absolute Mystery, and though human beings are predisposed toward that Mystery, it remains for us precisely that – mysterious. It has, however,

⁶⁵ Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar, Rahner and the Apprehension of Being', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, (Ed) M. Higon (London: SCM, 2007), p. 88.

⁶⁶ J.A. Di Noia, 'Karl Rahner', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology* ed. by David Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), p. 124.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

been revealed to us in the particular narrative of the Incarnation. As D'Costa says of Rahner's thought:

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the mystery of being, which is present to all persons by virtue of their nature, discloses itself and makes itself known as absolute self-giving and total love. Hence anthropology, Christology and revelation are inseparable.⁶⁸

As Rahner himself states, 'Christology maybe studied as self-transcending anthropology and anthropology as deficient Christology'.⁶⁹

Rahner therefore is able to say that the disclosure of the Absolute Mystery in Christ occurs because the structures of human knowledge that allow such knowledge are already in place. As Di Noia says of Rahners thought:

Revelation does not invade human reality as something utterly alien but as something to which human beings are already in some sense attuned.⁷⁰

Thus the two poles of the universal human orientation toward God given in the very structure of human knowing and the specific revelation of God in Christ provide Rahner with the basis of his theology of religious inclusivism. As he himself states:

Somehow all men must be capable of being members of the Church; and this capacity must not be understood merely in the sense of an abstract or purely logical possibility, but as a real and historically concrete one.⁷¹

⁶⁸ D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, p. 82.

⁶⁹ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon, Vol 1, 1961) p. 164.

⁷⁰ Ford, *Modern Theologians*, p. 124.

⁷¹ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 6, p. 391.

D'Costa outlines four theses, which Rahner suggests that God is savingly present *through* and not *despite* non-Christian religion. I shall now provide a paraphrase of D'Costa's own summary. Firstly, as Rahner states, 'Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, who cannot recognise any other religion besides itself as of equal right'.⁷² However, this is balanced by the recognition that the Christian Gospel has not reached all people, so that its universal validity and demand cannot be seen in isolation from its historical and existential situation. That situation affects two categories of people: those who existed before Jesus of Nazareth and those who lived after him, but have never, through no fault of their own, encountered the Gospel.

Secondly, God's salvific will is supremely and categorically revealed in Christ. Therefore God 'must somehow'⁷³ offer grace to all those who have never truly encountered the Gospel. The question then becomes, if such saving grace is offered to non-Christian peoples, is it *because* of their religion or *despite* it? Rahner answers the former, suggesting that:

A non-Christian religion [...] does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God [...] mixed up with human depravity [...] It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace that is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason, a non-Christian religion can be recognised as a *lawful* religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.⁷⁴

⁷² Rahner, *Theological investigations*, Vol 5, p. 118.

⁷³ D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, p. 85.

⁷⁴ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 5, p. 121.

Other religions are neither accepted in their entirety nor rejected as nothing more than idolatry. It is to say that, in principle, other religions contain elements which mediate grace and provide the means of salvation.

Thirdly, if a non-Christian has accepted God's grace in the depths of their heart expressed in a life of service and self-giving love then, Rahner suggests, we may think of them as being 'anonymous Christians'. Anonymous, because their faith is epistemologically deficient. Christian, because salvation can never be divorced from Christ, who is ontologically present. Mission however remains vital, not merely to make explicit what is implicit, but because by drawing the non-Christian into the sacramental community of the Church they 'have a still greater chance of salvation than someone who is an anonymous Christian'.⁷⁵

Fourthly, the Church is the tangible and explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is implicit and hidden outside of its visible life.

There is then in Rahner's thought a basic starting point which sees in our grasping of particularity (keyboards and daffodils) an underlying disposition toward unlimited possibility, and the universal ground of each and every specific possibility, '*esse*'. In so far as *esse* is pre-apprehended it is a pre-apprehension of God. There is thus a relation, a single act, between the particular and abstraction in which the apprehension of a particular object as object reveals the structure of our knowing. Our pre-apprehension of an unknown God opens up to us the possibility of an encounter and recognition in the particularity of history. As such, there is a universal *praeparatio evangelica* in this openness to the unknown God that establishes human being as capable of faith, hope and love, so that when a person acts as a self-transcending

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 132

subject, they are responding to the inner structure of an unconditional claim.

Christology is the precise expression of the unity between transcending Vorgriff and particular apprehension, the former enabling us to recognise the event of Jesus as revelatory and salvific and the latter fulfilling and indeed exceeding our already existing apprehension of self-giving love. Persons of other religious traditions who respond to the unknown God in the depths of their heart, experience, for Rahner and for D'Costa, the reality of saving grace, which is the reality of Christ.

In 2000, D'Costa published *The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity*, in which there is a marked change of perspective. It is not so much a rejection of Rahner, as a more developed rejection of pluralism, which also has implications for Rahner's transcendentalism. D'Costa offers three interrelated points of critique. Firstly, whilst presenting themselves as honest brokers between disputing parties pluralists are in fact representing another party, which the disputants are being invited to join. The blind men are being asked to join the King, where they will apparently be able to remove their blindfolds. But, secondly, who is the King? D'Costa suggests he has the various faces of post-Enlightenment modernity, the 'Unitarian, deistic or agnostic'.⁷⁶ So that thirdly, what appears to be the neutral position of the King turns out to be an (intolerant) exclusivism. For the perspective from where the King commands his view is not neutral, somewhere outside of things, but is rather itself tradition-specific, what D'Costa refers to as the 'Encyclopaedic'.⁷⁷ So, in the evolution of Hick's thought, from Christo-centricism (Ptolemaic) to theo-centricism (Copernican), to the 'Reality-Centred' what is being displaced is tradition-specific particularity, in the name of a

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

neutral universalism, which itself is a disguised version of the priorities of liberal modernity:

This de-privileging of the particular is a major theme within the modernity's re-interpretation of religion. If the adherents of world religions are not allowed to make fundamental ontological claims with their full force and implications, then harmony is arrived at through the destruction and neutralising of the Other.⁷⁸

Furthermore, the unmasking of the gods behind pluralism has also rendered inclusivism unhelpful. It is not that D'Costa now thinks non-Christians cannot be saved, but rather that inclusivism as a way of understanding salvation is a disguised form of exclusivism. The various inclusivist models operate by dismembering religions, whereby some doctrines, practices and images are recognised and affirmed and taken up into the Christian narrative. The cost is the other religion itself in its organic unity and practice. For the parts so taken only make sense in the context of the whole and vice versa (the so-called hermeneutical circle). What is being included is not that religion *per se*:

But a re-interpretation of that tradition in so much as that which is included is now included within a different paradigm, such that its meanings and utilisation within that new paradigm can only perhaps bear some analogical resemblance to its meaning and utilisation within its original paradigm.⁷⁹

Instead, D'Costa now offers a tradition-specific perspective, that of Roman Catholic Trinitarian theology, as offering a more open ended and authentic understanding and

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

encounter with non-Christian religions. This he does for three reasons. Firstly, because all thought or practice is always tradition-specific. Secondly, because he claims his tradition meets the demands for an honest, tolerant and transformative encounter with other religions; Thirdly, because it allows non-Christians to engage more fully and honestly in critiquing such a transparent position.

D' Costa begins by outlining the dogmatic teaching of the Roman church beginning with the *Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Nostra Aetate – NA), which was promulgated in 1965 and marked an important step in Roman Catholic theology. It was the first time that the Church had made a pronouncement on other religions and its tone was positive, focusing on what was help in common. The question that provokes D'Costa's interest is whether NA and the documents of Vatican II recognise non-Christian religions *per se* as vehicles of salvation. It is taken for granted that non-Christians as individuals may obtain salvation under three conditions: that through no fault of their own they do not know the Gospel; that such people strive to live a good life, thanks to God's grace i.e. through conscience and natural law, written in the hearts of all people, which assisted by grace leads to salvation; that the previous two points lead to, because they are preparation for, the complete Truth of the Gospel.

The other religions as systems in themselves are related to the Church differently. First is Judaism, which has a *sui generis* relation to it, for it is the root out of which the Church springs. NA recognises the joint understanding of revelation of the Hebrew scriptures. However, 'revelation' is not used about Judaism as such, nor in any of the sections dealing with the other religions, which are then related to Christianity, first with Islam, then with Hinduism and Buddhism. There is in fact a silence in response to D'Costa's question. Some, such as Rahner, interpret that silence

as leaving the door open. Some such as D'Costa see the silence as intentional, prohibiting an unqualified affirmation of religion as intrinsically salvific.

What has clearly emerged in these various responses to religious diversity is that they involve not some aspect of theology, as though non-Christian religions could be dealt with by a sub-department dealing with external affairs, rather they call into question every aspect of the Christian faith. Rowan Williams is quite correct in asking us to articulate foundational commitments. The types are responses to anxieties. Pluralism fears that a universal and finalized Christology flies in the face of the empirical fact of the world's religious diversity. It sees an unjustified confidence, bordering on arrogance, in the dismissal of the depths and vivacity of other religious traditions. Exclusivism fears the opposite; that pluralism relativises Christology, and thus God's revelation of Himself. God has spoken in Jesus Christ and salvation is the gift which comes through his sacrifice. Inclusivists fear that the other two typologies create a false choice, an either/or that a more nuanced Christology can and should overcome. With these questions and anxieties in mind, it is now time to turn to the fundamental commitments in the theology of Rowan Williams and to expose how they form the generating centres of a Trinitarian pluralism that responds to them.

Chapter 2: Revelation

This chapter will attempt to outline how Rowan Williams understands and articulates revelation. It will be divided into three parts. Part one will lay out the *grammar* of God as understood and employed by him. Part two will explore how Williams interprets the Christian understanding of revelation, of God speaking to us. Part three will examine the ways in which Williams responds to a theology of revelation ‘from above’ in the work of Karl Barth, followed by a response to a theology of revelation ‘from below’ in the work of Maurice Wiles. What will begin to emerge in this exposition will be the insistence of Williams that revelation cannot be dislocated from the processes of history. All three typologies, in various ways, do exactly that; ambiguity, conflict and change are all circumvented by revelation from above or below, which as we shall see in the final chapter do not provide a sustainable basis for engaging with plurality.

The grammar of God

God is a very dangerous three-letter word. The danger lies in believing that we know what we are referring to when the word is employed, for as the Roman Catholic theologian Denys Turner writes:

We could not properly know what it is that we are speaking of when we speak of God, for the creator of every manner and kind of thing cannot itself be a thing, or an instance of anything.¹

¹ Denys Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM, 2002), p. 9.

Such a claim to knowledge is, biblically speaking, idolatry. It is to understand God as being like us, but only more powerful, and that, as Herbert McCabe once suggested, is the greatest heresy of all.² God is radically and categorically different to anything else; yet even that is an inadequate statement, for as Turner goes on to say:

If God is not any kind of being, then his difference from creatures is not a *difference* of any kind; hence, is not incomparably greater, but, on the contrary, is simply *incommensurable*.³

If God is beyond difference what then is the ground for our speaking about God, for after all, we do attempt to speak about Him? How are we to know that God has spoken to us, for we do, as Christians, claim that we have been addressed? Both of these claims to knowing are fraught with delusion and idolatry. As Herbert McCabe also says, ‘dealing with God is trying to talk of what we cannot talk of, trying to think of what we cannot think’.⁴ However, the utter mysterious nature of God does not mean that nothing meaningful can be said of the divine. It does require a nuanced and difficult grammar, which for Williams must constantly be on guard against drawing God into the world as yet one more thing. That temptation is twofold: on the one hand to make the transcendence and otherness of God a hierarchical relation to creation, in which case God becomes a kind of dominant presence in a power struggle whose rules are shared by creator and created. On the other hand, it is to mistake the radical presence of God to creation, his immanence, as a kind of distance, albeit an extremely intimate one, between two objects. A God who dominates is in effect not different enough, a God who is alongside us, no matter how close, is nevertheless an-other. The

² I cannot remember where I came across this reference.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ Herbert McCabe, ‘Aquinas on the Trinity’ in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 76.

relationship between creator and creation is not like that of a sculptor and sculpture, in which a thing is made and then left by its maker. It is, Williams suggests, more like a singer and a song in which the song is perpetually kept in existence by the singer.

Williams shares the conviction of Nicholas of Cusa in thinking of God as *non aliud*, which is to say that God is neither *other* to creation, nor yet *an-other* in creation.⁵ The otherness between God and the world:

Is inexhaustible and irreducible; nothing can bring these realities into co-ordination or - in the ordinary sense - subordination and superordination.⁶

There is always a difference which is beyond difference which is *more* than saying God is different *like this or that*. Divine difference is not the negation of all finite predicates that can be attached to it, for to do so would mean (echoing Baltasaar) that:

God would be the other belonging to a discourse about the finite world. God's life would be subsumed under that of the world – the antithesis of the world's thesis; and out of such a discourse, no possible language for divine freedom or love could be generated.⁷

On the other hand, the life of the world is not a subject alongside the life of God (sculptor and sculpture). God, as St Augustine insists, is more intimate to me than I am to myself, and this is precisely *because* of the divine transcendence and not despite it, for as Denys Turner suggests, 'the "otherness" of God [...] is such that it

⁵ I am very grateful to Brett Gray who gave me access to his PhD thesis on the Christology of Rowan Williams in which this way of understanding *non-aliud* is used and explored more fully.

⁶ Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar and Difference' in *Wrestling with Angels*, ed. by Higon (Canterbury: SCM, 2007), p. 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

could not stand in any relation of *exclusion* with anything whatever'.⁸ Like the singer and the song, God is the condition that eternally generates the world and as with the performance of a piece of music this involves time; the divine life is for Williams:

‘Alienated’ from itself in a gift so absolute that it establishes the possibility of a free response, of an authentic love. God truly loves God in and through what is, without qualification, *not* God – the realm of time and vulnerability, in which loving subjects are formed.⁹

God is neither an agent confronting other agents in a shared and contestable space, yet neither is the reality of God to be reduced to the inner life of human consciousness, which becomes detached from the processes of learning in a material and changing environment. The classical conventions of religious grammar precisely attempt to steer between these two poles.

For Williams the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, properly understood, guards against such domestication and provides us with some essential divine grammar. This is explored in his paper ‘On Being Creatures’.¹⁰ Beginning with an exploration of the understanding of creation in the writings of Matthew Fox, Williams recognises with him the distortions to which the classical doctrine can fall victim such as a dualism between nature and spirit and the justification of hierarchialism. However, for Williams, these critiques are descriptive of how a Christian doctrine of creation has been misunderstood and misused. They fail to understand properly the difference that God makes, or to be more accurate the kind of difference that God *is*. For the

⁸ Denys Turner ‘*Enlightenment, Postmodernity and Mission*’ in *Faith Seeking* (Canterbury: SCM, 2002), p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams ‘On Being Creatures’ in *On Christian Theology*, ed. by Rowan Williams (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000).

Christian understanding of creation requires both a radical and categorical otherness to God, for God is not another object in the universe. Nonetheless, it also simultaneously requires an intimate and eternal relation between the Creator and the created, for God is not 'other' to the universe. For Williams:

The belief that God created the world out of nothing is unquestionably a distinctive Jewish and Christian view in the late antique world.¹¹

He sees this idea as emerging after the Babylonian exile in which an unexpected and decisive deliverance is like a second exodus, which in turn 'comes to be seen as a sort of recapitulation of creation'.¹² Out of the anonymity of slavery, which is a kind of non-being, God calls by name a human community. This is not understood as the outcome of a process inherent in history, but a *pure summon* so that:

More and more, creation is seen as performed by the free utterance of God alone; the imagery of moulding something out of something else recedes.¹³

Williams goes on to suggest that at the heart of *creation ex nihilo* is not power. This, *prima facie*, sounds rather odd, for of all the things that God 'does' the act of creation surely suggests more than anything else an act of immense power. But power is a relation between two or more things; one has power *over* something or someone. But the *nihilo* is just that: no-thing. There is no *thing* to have power over. Instead creation is a calling into existence; it is to be understood in terms of vocation and response. As such:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 67.

¹² Ibid., p. 67.

¹³ Ibid., p. 68.

What creation emphatically isn't is any kind of imposition or manipulation; it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we 'naturally' might have, or defining us out of our systems into God's. Creation affirms that to be here at all, to be part of this natural order and to be the sort of thing capable of being named – or having a role – is 'of God'; it is because God wants it so.¹⁴

A further articulation of divine grammar is to be found in a paper simply entitled 'God.'¹⁵ In this paper, Williams explores the relationship between the classical philosophical considerations of the divine transcendence and its fusion with a Christian discourse set against its Jewish background. He suggests that the kind of theological question that emerges when there is identification between the God of Israel and Jesus cannot be responded to without proper reference to the grammatical issues that go to the heart of the philosophical tradition. Furthermore, the philosophical preoccupation with what *existence* actually means is for the God of the Hebrew scripture constantly clarified in terms of divine initiative in what He has done and whom He has known. In the Exodus 3 passage, he is the God of the 'fathers' even before he is the 'I am' of the great self-declaration'.¹⁶

This is to say that God's transcendence is discerned and discovered in His freedom to create a people and to set them free. What is more, the giving of the Law to Israel establishes that the relationship with God is identical to the claims of justice between people; the word 'God' does not name one more element amongst others in the life of the community, it is what constitutes there being a community at all:

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams 'God' in *Theology and Religious Studies for the twentieth century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), Ford, D. et al., editors

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

God's priority in the life of the covenant community is not a matter of ascribing to God a greater significance than is possessed by anything else; God is that to which every action in some sense refers, that which every action manifests or fails to manifest, and, as such, an agent who cannot be compared with other agents.¹⁷

If God is not one more thing amongst others then theology must resist the temptation to make an object of its subject; i.e. if religious language does not describe a set of items in the world, it must understand its own difference. That difference Williams explores in relation of the work of Michel de Certeau,¹⁸ who rightly (for Williams) warns against identifying some area of human discourse unambiguously with God. Again, Williams re-asserts, 'God is spoken of truthfully only in the entire context of talk, narrative, action'.¹⁹ We would, however, be wrong to conclude that if all such talk, narrative and action were to be added up then we would 'have' God. Instead, de Certeau (and by implication, Williams) insists that theology 'points to' and 'holds on' to what is 'unsaid', to that which is not yet thought, for 'thinking constantly confronts otherness'.²⁰ This is in fact the case also for all the human sciences of modernity, which offer a complex and often competing plurality of voices and there is no systematic narrative that can relate and bring harmony to this chorus. The 'gap' between the 'the real' and the cacophony of scientific and secular description is one that *cannot* be filled. For (as with Hegel) that which is not-yet-thought is 'other than a

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 80.

specific problem within the system'.²¹ De Certeau suggests that Christianity offers a kind of methodological clue to how we think and begin to speak about that which has not yet been spoken. For Christianity's fundamental narrative is:

So conspicuously one of absence; it rests on an absent body, not a graspable set of teachings and institutional rules laid down by a 'normal' historical founder.²²

Although Williams suggests a caution toward de Certeau,²³ the pressure toward 'what brings to speech that absence'²⁴ is what makes possible prayer and witness in the Christian life. The divine absences, which at one and at the same time are the fullness of divine activity, are a "superficial paradox".²⁵ The Son has surrendered himself to the absent Father, and has 'become part of the divine absence itself'²⁶ with the consequence that meaning and authority can never be simply read off the immediate and 'appear only in the ways in which the whole of the story consistently evokes the absence that makes space for us'.²⁷ As we shall go on to see, this 'absence' which makes 'space' offers, for Williams, a Christology in which Jesus has no need to be the answer to everything, not least the question which other religions apparently pose.

The Authorship of God

The careful and persistent attention Williams pays to the grammar of God has an important analogy to that of literary authorship. There is, for instance, a kind of

²¹ Ibid., p. 81.

²² Ibid., p. 80.

²³ Ibid., p. 80.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

apophaticism in the grammar of poetry that Thomas Merton articulates and Williams explores. Poetry isn't, and is against, magic, for that would be to draw it into the realm of manipulation, control and the exercise of power. Secondly, poetry isn't, and is against, being useful, "particularly that usefulness which we think of in terms of moralism".²⁸ The moral may (or may not) emerge, but the point of poetry is *itself*, 'the doing of something which has its own integrity'.²⁹ Thirdly, poetry is against a focus on the artist and not the work, for that would 'draw our attention precisely to the manipulating, controlling will which is the enemy of all really truthful utterance'.³⁰ Finally, poetry is against the notion that we have infinite choices, for if poetry is about the work and not the author then that labour has to do with limits and the finite, with 'specificity'.³¹ The suggestion of Williams is that writing which resists these four enemies of poetry is *religious* writing, and that is not to be confused with writing *about* religious things. Rather it is religious *activity*.³² Williams further suggests that there is a connection between what Merton has to say about poetic writing and also contemplation, which in turn gives us a clue into the nature of the prophetic and the doctrinal.

Writing that resists the magical and the manipulative as well as the wilful and the egocentric has the possibility of being open to the truth, to allow God. This is to say that such writing 'aligns my action with *what is being done* in my environment'.³³

Williams rejects the idea that this means passivity, but, on the contrary, a rather

²⁸ Rowan William. *A Silent Action. Engagements with Thomas Merton* (SPCK: London, 2011) p. 44.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

³¹ Ibid., p. 45.

³² Ibid., p. 47.

³³ Ibid., p. 47.

demanding attention to be present where one is, so that words and perception meet what is most fundamental i.e. God:

Religious writing, writing that is religious work, is part of our attunement to the doing of God, made real and concrete here in how we see and how we attend: a loving and acting, a perceiving without egotistical will, but without passive resignation.³⁴

Poetry, as religious activity, is generated out of contemplation. Drawing on St John's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*,³⁵ Williams sees a deep resonance between what poetry is not, as understood by Merton, and the 'dark night' in which not only religious language about God collapses but also any notion of the 'self.' In contemplation the picture I have of myself, the one I cherish and nurture is blurred and so my will is paralysed as it lacks potency in imposing itself on the situation it is in. This is a *costly openness*, which whilst requiring dependency on God is not a passivity, but which may allow for 'new words for God',³⁶ which is to say 'God's act in the present moment'.³⁷ If Christian doctrine is not a set of abstract concepts to be believed, but functions to navigate us to the place where 'God acts in creating and transfiguring',³⁸ then the words we use for God must be prophetic, 'because the prophetic is all about the diagnosis of dead words and false acts. The prophetic task is to smell out death in a situation'.³⁹ This 'apophatic of the poetic' is a way to the positive definition of the poetic, for the stripping away of the ego, the dissolution of fantasy, being open to

³⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

judgement are activities which ‘we can’t begin to grasp or get any purchase on, without the vivid and sometimes frightening sense of what they are open to’.⁴⁰

It is however in his reflections on the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky that Williams finds the most sustained and comprehensive understanding of literature as analogous to the grammar of God and so to an understanding of what revelation is a revelation of.

Williams strongly resists the common perception that Dostoevsky’s novels are replete with the anxiety of an author who is constantly struggling with the question of God’s existence. For Williams, Dostoevsky is requiring that his readers inhabit a world in which the question ‘of what human beings owe each other’⁴¹ is left painfully open, but which at the same time offer the possibility, for both the characters *and the reader*, of seeing the world in a different light, the light of faith. The kind of faith which Dostoevsky is revealing to us is one which despite the extremities of failure, pain and suffering still allows us to live with a recognisable solidarity, depth and compassion with each other, but that requires, in his novels, an intense exploration of those extremes.

There is no simple resolution in Dostoevsky’s fiction to these questions and experiences. Rather they are pushed to the limit and the reader is drawn into them and made to ask herself where she stands, how we see the world, and what is it we believe we owe our neighbours. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Williams gives great weight to the ‘polyphonic’ nature of Dostoevsky’s work, which for Williams is the recognition of the ‘coexistence of profoundly diverse voices, making the novel itself a constant and unfinished interplay of perspectives’.⁴² Characters do not

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 1.

⁴² Ibid., p. 3.

represent one simple coherent philosophical or theological position. They are living creations, unpredictable, changing their minds, and often indeed simultaneously hold views that are contradictory. The ‘question’ of God’s existence and revelation is not one about the possibility of seeing something in addition to the facts of the world. The nature of the question at stake is:

the difference between the self-aware believer, the self-aware sinner and the conscious and deliberate atheist [which] is not a disagreement over whether or not to add one item to the sum total of really existing things. It is a conflict about politics and possibilities for a human life between someone who accepts the dependence of everything on divine gratuity and attempts to respond with some image of that gratuity, someone who accepts this dependence but fails to act appropriately in response, and someone who denies the dependence and is consequently faced with the unanswerable question of why any one policy for living is preferable to any other.⁴³

Dostoevsky creates a fictional world in which, as Williams might put it, God does not wish to be everything. He is not ‘revealed’ in obvious ways, as though He was an ‘onion dome painted on a backdrop’.⁴⁴ Rather, God is encountered in an order made visible in dialogue, argument and in the lives of ‘certain “iconic” characters’.⁴⁵ But that order is not easily seen or established, for the novel itself, rather like creation itself, has its own life, which whilst utterly dependent on author/creator follows its own paths. Dostoevsky, ‘like God’, enables his characters to have a life of their own; they are not mouthpieces for his own views and preferences. There is an analogy,

⁴³ Ibid., p. 227.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

therefore, between writing and divine creation that is directed toward freedom and not control:

The novel cannot reassure us about anything except that the creator of the narrative world has created a real and indissoluble otherness and relates to it in unbroken respect for its otherness.⁴⁶

The analogy, like all analogies is of course limited. But Williams' Dostoevsky helps us to see, to some degree, what divine creation might be like and in the creation of a world in which the unexpected and indeed 'unscripted' constantly emerges, and so is a world 'in which there is no imposed last word'⁴⁷. The divine 'reveals' itself not in a shout, nor in successfully competing with worldly voices. The 'iconic' in Dostoevsky, is not triumphant, but it is shown to be actual and persistent in characters that retain and embody value and depth, the origin of which is not simply personal taste or private belief. Dostoevsky, for Williams, has a theology of creation and incarnation that 'is finally "realist", in the sense that he is repeatedly directing us toward a pattern of divine action that is outside our heads or hearts'.⁴⁸ Having established the utter dependence of the world on its creator, as novel is to author, and yet recognised its own inner freedom and integrity, as the lives of Dostoevsky's characters do in their 'autonomy' from the writer, the temptation is to believe we now have established the nature of the divine difference: a grammar in which the divine can now be identified and spoken. But as David Burrell states:

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 235.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 234.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

It cannot simply be a matter of getting that distinction straight once and for all, so that we would ever after be able to employ that formulation as a kind of algorithm to modify all subsequent statements.⁴⁹

It brings us back to the dialogue between Williams and de Certeau. If it is God that we are speaking of, then he cannot be one more item on the list of things in the universe; there is no merely religious revelation. God is that to which, in some sense everything refers; yet this is not a graspable or lasting identity, it is not a complex system which, in its entirety, captures the divine. There is, as Williams sees in the work of de Certeau, a ‘foundational absence in the origins of faith’,⁵⁰ which evokes the gift and promise of a non-territorial God. As we shall see in the final chapter, for Williams the language of Christianity must be steadfastly resistant to all forms of the territorial. The three typologies on the other hand, for Williams, offer variations of such a competitive relationship between God and the world.

Revelation: The Christian Narrative

Grammar of course enables language to work and to be meaningful. It enables speaking and hearing and so relating. We turn now to outline something of Rowan Williams’s understanding of the specific Jewish/Christian narrative of revelation, of how and what is disclosed ‘by God’, of what is being said. In *Trinity and Revelation*⁵¹ Williams suggests that when we speak about God we are not naming any particular thing which can be inspected and analysed, and therefore ‘it seems that we must as believers assume that we talk about God on the basis of “revelation” – of what has

⁴⁹ David Burrell. *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988), p. 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

⁵¹ Rowan Williams. *On Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 131-147

been shown to us by God's will and action'.⁵² As we have seen in the previous chapter, this is a fundamental and foundational commitment of those who stand somewhere in the exclusivist and inclusivist traditions. If that word, God, is not empty of meaning, then Williams suggests that we are in some way '*authorised*' to use it⁵³. However, we immediately encounter theological red lights for Williams if we imagine that revelation is the transfer of other-worldly truth and information to humanity in obvious and unequivocal terms. For then such a communication 'cannot be said to have roots in the ordinary events on which we depend for the "authorising" of our usual speech'.⁵⁴ The danger is then that the Incarnation is understood as the necessary tool and medium that ensures that divine truth is able to be accurately communicated, and so suggesting 'that God became human was a regrettable necessity, which we may safely ignore after we have reached a certain stage of theological expertise'.⁵⁵ That is to say, the gulf between human language and divine speech is overcome by an understanding of the Incarnation that occurs *in*, but is not part *of* history. That God should become a human being becomes a kind of religious solution, which once performed allows us to move on from it. For Williams this is a short-cut. For to begin with revelation, understood as authorised speech, but which is self-evident and self-justifying is to have an 'impatience with learning, and with learning about our learning'.⁵⁶ For Williams, theology must pay attention to the question of how it *learns* its own language, otherwise talk of authorisation becomes an appeal to

⁵² Ibid., p. 131.

⁵³ Ibid., p.131.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.131.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

unchallengeable authority; revelation is ‘thought of as essentially heteronomous, determined from an elusive “elsewhere”’.⁵⁷

Approaching the question of revelation by asking about how we learn our theological language, Williams is attempting to avoid on one hand the Scylla of thinking of revelation as the giving of propositional truth and on the other, the Charybdis of a liberal theology that is essentially a-historical. The former runs the risk of making what is ‘given’ as being fixed and finished. Imagining revelation as the giving of a deposit of faith, complete and contained within its own self-interpretation cuts it off from the roots of ordinary events upon which our usual speech relies. Revelation as the imparting of divinely authored propositional truth is, for Williams, the assertion of a centre of achieved and non-ambiguous language and practice floating somewhere above our own fragmented reality. As such it becomes:

An area of heteronomy, occupied by those whose task is defined as applying or bestowing what they possess, transmitting the fruits of this ‘achieved status’ to those who do not possess it.⁵⁸

The latter, liberal theology, is constantly running the risk of appealing to a model of truth which is separable from the dialectical processes of its historical reflection, for it appeals to:

Some isolable core of encounter, unmediated awareness of the transcendent, buried beneath the accidental forms of historical givenness, a trans-cultural, pre-linguistic, inter-religious phenomenon.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

Revelation is, for Williams, neither the descent of a supernatural, self-authenticating deposit, nor a natural springing up of a religious consciousness from out of the deep wells of the human psyche. In both cases, *history* is not taken seriously. For Williams history is crucial; it is in the (continuous) conflict and struggles of the church understanding what it is to be church that we see what is at stake in claims to revelation.

So how then does Williams wish to speak of revelation? He suggests that the starting point for introducing such a notion is to provide some ground for saying that our religious language is not ultimately initiated by us; ‘before we speak, we are addressed or called’.⁶⁰ Williams draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur who linked the idea of revelation with poetics. A poetic text does not employ the normal functional nature of language; it is not referential or descriptive. Instead, as Ricoeur suggests and as Williams agrees, it:

Restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things, which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject.⁶¹

There is in other words the possibility of overcoming the subject-object relations that human beings tend to assume (the ‘I’ imposing itself upon the external world). The world is more than the observer and the observed. In a paper which critiques the functional nature of the secular, Williams quotes from *Burnt Norton* by T.S. Eliot:

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

⁶¹ Taken from ‘Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation’ *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by L.S. Mudge (London: SPC, 1980), p. 101 (cited by Williams in OCT p. 133).

...the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses

Had the look of flowers that are looked at.⁶²

The roses already exist in a world of meaning and reference, as does the one who sees them, implying that the secular is, in the end, a failure to see things and other people as the objects of another sensibility other than my own, or even than *our* own. The non-secular (and therefore the possibility of the 'revealed') is 'that what I am aware of, I am aware of as in significant dimensions not defined by my awareness'.⁶³

Instead there is the possibility of entering into a world which is not of my making but which also invites me to share. A poetic world displays such a possible world, it is concerned with a kind of testimony, a 'reality in which my human reality can also find itself',⁶⁴ and which by entering into the world of the text my own possibilities and horizons are extended and broken open. To think of revelation in such a way is, for Williams, essentially about it being *generative*; that which breaks open existing frameworks and references and so initiates new possibilities. A poetic text can be said to be revelatory because of its capacity to generate new questions, 'rather than answering old ones'.⁶⁵ Indeed, to recognise any text, or tradition or event as being revelatory is to say something about its capacity to create a new form of life.

So, revelation is not to do with truths that have been deposited and need to be assented to, but with that which is generative. As such Williams believes he moves

⁶² Williams, R. 'Has secularism failed?' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 13.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

toward a view of revelation that ‘opens up’ rather than closes down: it ‘extends rather than limits the range of ambiguity and conflict in language’⁶⁶. One might say revelation on this account is about the fresh questions rather than old answers; a generative power which creates new life. As such, revelation emerges from the questioning of the contemporary with a particular past. So to begin to connect this with biblical revelation, Williams suggests that, for example, the events of the Exodus ‘were revelatory insofar as they were generative of the community of Israel itself’ and the Torah was revelatory because ‘it was what specified the form of life of that community’.⁶⁷ We begin to see then how Williams wishes to connect the initial generative moment (whether that be a text or event) with its ongoing re-appropriation.

As such, he suggests that to articulate a unique Old Testament doctrine of God lies not in attempting to isolate and define a particular divine attribute, as though revelation were the recognition of a particular idea about God, but to ask what sort of community is established and is constantly attempting to be re-established which lives *like this*: ‘the sort of God who can be the God of *this* community with its particular, socially distinctive features’.⁶⁸ Revelation is therefore about a process, one in which a community becomes ever mindful of what it is that makes it *that* community, ‘it constitutes a concept of God for itself by asking what it is that constitutes *itself*’.⁶⁹ So to employ the word ‘God’ is to speak about the meaning *of* meaning.

Revelation is therefore not a one-off event authored by God, which inserts itself into human language. Neither is it human language projecting itself upon a blank divine screen. Revelation embraces the initiating event that causes the hermeneutical spiral

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

and the movement of the hermeneutical spiral itself. Or as noted earlier, it is about ‘learning about learning.’ Event and (never finalised) interpretation must be taken together.

How might this approach be used to understand the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth? For Williams the New Testament bears witness to this view of understanding revelation as attending to ‘the generative point and the debate generated’.⁷⁰ The opening sentence of Williams’ first published book gives a clue to what this might mean:

Christian faith has its beginnings in an experience of profound contradictoriness, an experience that so questioned the religious categories of its time that the resulting organisation of religious language was a centuries-long task.⁷¹

Revelation is to be understood in terms of the generating event and the hermeneutical spiral generated, and this can be traced in the documents of the New Testament.

Williams highlights four movements of this spiral that can be paraphrased in the following way. It is firstly to recognise certain kinds of language about resurrection. It is to be involved in an intense debate about Israel and the Law. It is to adopt the name ‘Father’ as the normative way of addressing the God of Israel. Jesus’ name for God defines the Christians’ relation to the same God, ‘to recognise Jesus’ Abba as the decisive interpretation of your own prayer’.⁷² It is to be active in proclaiming that Jesus is the judge of all, and so the focal point for commitment in faith and that this is to be understood as ‘good news’. The imperative with which Jesus preached the

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

⁷¹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.11.

⁷² Ibid., p.135.

kingdom is of more than merely local relevance. The judgment of that Kingdom is universal and there ‘is no theological excuse for restricting the offer of a grace, which will carry men and women through this judgment.’⁷³ The Church begins to understand and recognise itself as a community that is in principle open to all; it is therefore ‘not-Israel’⁷⁴ and it is not one more cult amongst other cults. Williams points to what might be thought of as a dialectical relation between the universal message of the gospel and the universal significance of Christ as its generative centre. The story of Jesus is told and retold in order to show the generative power of his life and ‘to celebrate his present Lordship in exploratory and variegated hymnic images’.⁷⁵ The story of Jesus sets the limits for this new community of the Church, yet those limits are nothing less than the whole of the human race itself. This ‘learning about learning’ creates new possibilities for ‘the form of human life as such, not merely for a particular group to find identity’.⁷⁶ Here revelation is not to be understood as Jesus of Nazareth simply and unambiguously embodying the presence of God; rather, the ongoing struggle by the Christian community to articulate, and itself ‘embody Jesus’, is how that revelation is disclosed and *discovered*.

To put this in a different way, in William’s treatment and understanding of revelation, he seeks always to connect it to the historical. The Christ of faith cannot be abstracted from the Jesus of history. The Jesus of history must give clarity to what we mean by the divinity of Christ. He insists that the debates generated, the deeply embedded tensions and the strain on language arise *because* of the generating events and not because of later impositions (the claim for instance that Paul ‘invented’ Christianity).

⁷³ Ibid., p. 137.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 137.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

Revelation is embedded in the context of a particular religio-political history; the self-discourse of God is only to be understood as the divine disclosure within ‘the call-and-response, promise and fulfilment grammar of Jewishness’.⁷⁷ It also begins to answer the question as to what it might mean to say that this revelation is *divine* revelation. As we noted earlier Williams begins his reflection on revelation by recognising it as more akin to poetics than our usual descriptive language. Revelation is about that which generates, but that of course raises the question as to whether anything that ‘generates’ new possibilities and new questions is divine, or on the other hand, how we know that that which is given the status of divine revelation is indeed authorized and initiated by God. What is it that distinguishes the generating events of the Old and New Testaments from the works of Shakespeare, or the novels of Iris Murdoch or indeed the poetry of Rowan Williams? For Williams, the answer has something to do with history, to the actual communities (Israel and the Church) which find their self-identity constituted and constantly reconstituted by their founding events (Exodus and Torah and Jesus of Nazareth).

Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the generating event of God’s revelation to us. The event leads to *conflict*, both in the language which the community Jesus has gathered around himself uses to make sense of who he is, but also in the kind of identity this community is to have, firstly with regard to Israel and then to the Gentile world. For Williams, the pressure which is generated in this conflict leads to the recognition that the significance of Jesus is to be understood as parallel to the initial creative act itself, i.e. ‘In the beginning was the Word’.⁷⁸ But that recognition is not straightforward, it incurs enormous continual conflict, which is not simply intellectual

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 138.

and abstract, but also political. The doctrinal arguments and disputes of the first centuries of the Christian Church are the outworking of this conflict, or as Williams would put it, the ‘hermeneutical spiral generated’ and therefore the mode of revelation.

Crucial to those conflicts, as found in the Arian controversy, is the question of how that which is thought to be characteristic of God alone – utter generative power, the capacity to create and recreate the limits of human existence – can also be said to be encountered in the particularity of one human life and death. After all, part of the mystery invoked in the use of that three letter word ‘God’ is to recognise that God is uncontainable in human language and systems. Yet clearly the historical Jesus belongs, and could not be anything other than belonging, to the contingencies of history. God is always generative and not generated, always and eternally free, never responding and changing in relation to the world. Jesus of Nazareth, like us all, was. To ask that question within the grammar of God set out above, we need to ask how is it possible to encounter the ‘difference beyond difference’, which God is, in the person of Jesus? This will be explored in the following chapter on Christology.

Revelation: Above and Below

Authentic divine grammar, for Williams, creates a space from itself whereby God is free to be God. Divine revelation is not an isolated event inserted into history, but the constant striving for continuity between initiating event and subsequent interpretation. These two axioms provide the framework in which Williams makes sense of Christian doctrine. If it is the living God that the Church’s language seeks to help us hear then we should not be surprised if the cost of that language is struggle, conflict and effort. There is no simple deposit of faith handed down from above, which needs to be

defended at all costs against a dangerous secular and liberal world. There is no self-contained apprehension of God lying deep within the human psyche that needs merely to be excavated, freed from the contingent layers of human culture. What there is, is history and specifically a history of doctrine, all of which is a place of conflict and struggle. For Williams, doctrine is the continuous need by the church to be loyal to a Christian tradition that is under strain. It is therefore a continuing project, one in which the past is questioned, but one in which the past questions us. Commenting on this attitude, Benjamin Myers is right in suggesting that Williams seeks to secure ‘a tradition of holding Christian speech open to the judgement of its originating source’.⁷⁹ Orthodoxy, for Williams, seeks to keep religious language *open*; heresy seeks to close it down. Orthodoxy will, therefore, inevitably make language *strange*, precisely in order for it to be *new*. Fundamental to the argument put forward in *Arius*⁸⁰ is the contention that Arius was in fact a biblical conservative. He was somebody who attempted to bestow upon Jesus the highest possible significance within an already existing and established framework. What Athanasius understood was that the originating event and continuing interpretation demanded a new framework.

Again, we see that the enemies of this are theologies of revelation that are from ‘above’ or from ‘below.’ The former sees any theological struggle by the Church simply in terms of the attempt to articulate what is already divinely given. The latter can fall easily into the trap of understanding any particular doctrinal or religious narrative as being illustrative of truths about God, which are in principle independent

⁷⁹ Benjamin Myers, ‘Disruptive History: Rowan Williams on Heresy and Orthodoxy’ in *On Rowan Williams Critical Essays*, ed. by M. Russell, (Oregon: Cascade, 2009), p. 56.

⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, *Arius* (SCM: London, 1987)

of any particularity and localisms. In a paper on revelation, Ben Quash⁸¹ calls revelation from below ‘reductionist’,⁸² and suggests it is one which holds the ‘conviction that access to the divine is in one way or another a “natural phenomenon”’.⁸³ He further suggests that revelation from above is ‘positivist’ and as such it is an approach that constantly runs the risk of understanding revelation as ‘set up as something having full authority over the insights of reason and sensibility, and not in any way subject to them’.⁸⁴

For Williams, both these approaches avoid history, and particularly the history of doctrine. When engaging with other religious traditions, a reductionist approach will therefore know in advance what to recognise as being authentic. A positivist approach will know in advance that there is nothing to recognise.

I will now explore how Williams responds to a type of reductionist theology as exemplified by Maurice Wiles and a positivist one as reflected in the thought of Karl Barth.

Maurice Wiles

Maurice Wiles was very much part of a liberal theological mood in the 1960s and 1970s Britain, which included figures such as Dennis Nineham and Don Cupitt. Common to them all was an attitude to the past that saw it as being a foreign country whose cultural presuppositions were very much different from our own. Williams suggests that Maurice Wiles thought can be summed up with a question:

⁸¹ Ben Quash, ‘Revelation’, in *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.325-40.

⁸² Ibid., p. 326

⁸³ Ibid., p. 328

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 329

If, as surely is the case, traditional doctrinal statements make claims about what is actually true about the universe, how do we respond to those claims in an intellectual climate in which they cannot possibly be *legitimated*?⁸⁵

The cultural milieu of the first centuries of Christian history that produced the creeds and doctrinal definitions was one that was not ours. Analysis reveals that doctrines are composite statements made up of various uses of analogy, appealing to a variety of differing proofs and combined into a systematic whole with various fundamental starting points.⁸⁶ For Wiles they can neither provide us with simple information about what is ‘out there’, nor in a way that is universally accessible. How these doctrinal statements were constructed and made sense to those who constructed them is no longer shared by us. What is more, they draw on intellectual factors in the culture in which Christian faith was being nurtured and which are external to that faith itself. For example, the doctrine of the Incarnation does indeed claim to reveal information or the propositional truth about God becoming a human being in the person of Jesus. However, the apocalyptic language and references of the New Testament period as well as the philosophical assumptions of the language of *ousia* that were fundamental in constructing that doctrine are simply not how we make sense of things. As Williams recognizes, the implication of Wiles’ thought would mean that:

If a doctrinal statement might be telling us the truth, but we were incapable of articulating any coherent criteria for deciding whether it were doing so or not,

⁸⁵ Rowan Williams, ‘Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism’ in *Wrestling with Angels, Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. by M. Higon (London: SCM, 2007), p. 276.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

the one thing the doctrine surely could *not* be telling anybody would be
'saving' truth.⁸⁷

Wiles is ready to acknowledge what one might call a 'dynamic impulse' behind doctrinal statements; the early Christians were driven by 'the immensity of the experiences in which they were caught up and which they associated with [Jesus] as risen Lord'.⁸⁸ The problem, however, is that these interpretations are being grounded in an ontology which, firstly, imposes a framework upon the person of Jesus which is alien to him and which, secondly, is a framework that simply cannot make sense for us. Consequently for Wiles, the doctrine of the Incarnation offers not the 'propositional veracity of what it actually claims, but the transforming impact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.'⁸⁹ As such, Williams suggests, Wile's Christology is in the end illustrative, (which is to say in principle independent of the particularity of Jesus) rather than constitutive of the character of the divine, for the dynamic impulse essentially offers an *insight* into the mystery of God.⁹⁰

Williams accepts that Wiles is asking questions that cannot be ignored, but finds serious faults and inadequacies in his handling of them. Firstly, he believes that Wiles has prematurely assimilated doctrinal criticism to biblical criticism. The latter can be seen as having two inter-related dimensions. Firstly, it is to put the text into context. It is to recognize how a text works in its setting and so become aware of the contours and forms which the various biblical texts assume. This potentially allows a text to set its own terms of reference so that it is not simply and quickly forced into the reader's world and 'the main point of this exercise, whether in its classical or

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 277.

⁸⁸ Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1974), p. 53.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 277.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 288-289.

modern form, is to make sure that we do not derive from the text information that it is not designed to give'.⁹¹ Secondly, in our post-Enlightenment period this has developed into what is sometimes called *Tendenzkritik*, which is to ask 'in whose interest does this text work?' Liberationist and feminist hermeneutics are particularly strong examples of this form of critique, and such approaches to scripture have a particularly sharp eye that focuses our attention on recognizing non-accountable authority in the text and to 'hear' what the text keeps silent. Biblical studies, Williams suggests, along both these lines reveal that:

The text tells us both more and less than we thought; more about the history of its own production and about its world of reference, less about what it *purports* to tell us of a distant or relatively distant series of events.⁹²

Williams simply rejects Wiles' view that doctrinal statements operate and can be analysed as narratives, in the same way as, for example, one may do with John's gospel. The *doctrine* of the incarnation is not meant to 'tell the story' of how the second Person of the Trinity assumes human flesh, it is not 'a simple narrative of a divine agent embarking upon a fresh episode in his biography'.⁹³ The fault line with doctrine cannot be a confusion of metaphor and ontology. Doctrinal language, for Williams, is a text that is from the start aware of its own ambiguities. It draws together the pre-dogmatic commitment of the Church to a whole set of complex practices; liturgical, biblical, devotional, moral, imaginative and so forth, which seeks to embody the Church's conviction about Jesus by '[establishing] the conditions for telling this truth in the most comprehensive, least conceptually extravagant, and least

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 279.

⁹² Ibid., p. 275.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 281.

idly mythological language'.⁹⁴ The history of doctrinal controversy, Williams suggests, is to a large degree, a struggle to surround with warning signs the anthropomorphic and the mythological, so that Christian doctrinal language always carries 'an immanent critique'⁹⁵ of what it is claiming. As such Christian language does not 'close down', but 'opens up'. Nonetheless, it may indeed be the case that Christian doctrine carries with it, its own religious health warning as it were, but what if, as Wiles might suggest, this is merely a sophisticated mechanism constructed out of a basic misconception? Yet this, for Williams, is to hold to a rather reductive view of the history of doctrine that 'tends repeatedly to search for some originary miscalculation or wrong turning, some category error about the status of the language used'.⁹⁶ For Williams it is in the tensions, conflicts and the struggle between dogma and metaphor within differing historical contexts that doctrine opens the Church up to what we wish to call revelation. If Jesus is constitutive of language about God it is because what is said, done and endured in patient suffering by the Christian community is only intelligible with reference to how the narrative of Jesus is 'held actively to shape present horizons, in judgement and in grace'.⁹⁷

Tendenzkritik is, he suggests, much more of a challenge to doctrine than a critical-historical method. It raises questions about the interests any doctrinal talk about God serves and legitimate. Wiles has only a muted interest in this school of criticism, but it is an approach which develops from out of one of the most important elements Williams recognises in Wiles' work, 'that doctrine really does have a history'.⁹⁸ That history as we have noted is one of conflict, of the contestation of power to define and

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 286.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 285.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 287.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 295.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 182.

mould and so ‘doctrine is implicated in power if it is implicated in history’.⁹⁹ Again, but in a more disturbing way, this suggests the importation of factors external to the foundational experience of the story and impact Jesus of Nazareth that have shaped and possibly determined the direction of later engagement. Williams, interestingly, concedes that he does not think ‘that there is any simple or general response which would blunt the edge of this sort of criticism’.¹⁰⁰ There is after all nothing untouched by culture and by the power struggles that constitute it. Any defence of the viability of doctrine against the accusation of an intrinsically alien imposition would, however, have to show how that imposition was the determining factor. (To refer back to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* for example, it will be remembered that an understandable feminist critique of God as an ‘external’ creator legitimising patriarchy and dualism, may indeed be how that doctrine has been used. Yet it is not what the doctrine is; it actually is a critique of power. The importance of *Tendenzkritik* is its recognition of history and conflict; Williams’ response is to agree, but to suggest that careful attention paid to this history reveals a self-critique, which is on-going, that may free religious language from self-interest. To put this another way, Williams is not trying to escape the real and difficult questions, which the nature of doctrine raise by attempting to stand outside of history; that is, in the end, the failure of ‘revelation from below’, and to which Williams, I believe, rather mutely accuses Wiles.

That ‘below’ is the position of the King as described in the introduction. It is an abstract universal rationalism¹⁰¹ that assumes a position which stands beyond local

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 282.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 282.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 295, Williams suggests that Wiles does not profess such a position, but ‘comes pretty near it’.

disputes and perceptions and its analogy is the legal tribunal. With reference to the thought of Wiles, Williams detects the ‘position of the King’ reflected in an approach to the truth and adequacy of doctrinal statements that ‘can be tested in a fundamentally historical and analytical discipline’,¹⁰² a position which is in theory neutral, but in practice sceptical. For Williams, there is no neutrality, and no view from outside. Yet this, he suggests, does not doom us to a hopeless relativism. It is rather to recognise how

particular perceptions cope with and absorb contesting claims and maintain elements of critical ‘listening’ provisionality within their own frameworks than with meeting foreordained universal conditions of legality.¹⁰³

The difference between Wiles and Williams, as the latter himself acknowledges,¹⁰⁴ is how to read, understand and respond to the *difference* made by Jesus. Chapter three will elucidate that difference, which for Williams is universal, decisive, but not final. It is that very lack of finality that responds to concerns raised by Wiles and also challenges the assumptions of the inclusivist typology.

Karl Barth

If Wiles comes perilously close to suggesting that the truth of revelation is accessible to supposedly neutral academic study,¹⁰⁵ Karl Barth confronts us with the opposite: it is Gods revelation of himself which interrogates us. Barth, as we noted in the previous chapter claims to be describing not an idea of revelation but the structure of revelation itself; for an idea would be a pre-existing concept that determined the nature of God’s

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 294.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 294.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 294.

revelation and that would amount to the very anthropocentrism that Barth is at pains to avoid. Barth insists that it is in the structure and inner relations of God's speaking in the Word-made-flesh that determines all that theology may say about the God who speaks. The three fold nature of revelation, Christ-scripture-preaching is not a system that can manufacture revelation and so be open to automatic universal access. The hiddenness of the divine Word becomes manifest only as an expression of God's freedom and sovereignty to make it so. As Williams says, for Barth:

God is not trapped in the historical or secular form under which he speaks, his Word is identical with the form of Jesus (substantially) and of Scripture and of preaching (derivatively) because he elects that to be so.¹⁰⁶

Williams suggests, however, that Barth's prior insistence on establishing the sovereignty and freedom of God means that he does have a prior consideration in revelatory interpretation; that very insistence upon a particular understanding of the utter freedom of God becomes the controlling hermeneutical principle. Williams ponders whether the implication of this is Barth's inability to see revelation being found in the historical *qua* historical. The secular and the historical, Williams suggests, become divorced from the substance of revelation. There is no necessary connection between form and content in the revelatory act. The world and history are essentially alien to God; the 'stuff' of the world can be used by God, if God so chooses, to be a vehicle for his self-expression, but only as a kind of concealing exterior. As Williams recognises, we are thus brought to the reformation debates between the *communicatio idiomatum* and *extra calvinisticum*. The former recognises divine revelation *in* the contradiction, pain, ambiguity and absurdity of the cross; the

¹⁰⁶ Rowan Williams, "Barth on the Triune God" in *Wrestling with Angels* (SCM: London,) 2007

darkness and dereliction involved in the historical narrative of the man Jesus, executed outside of the city in itself tells us something about God; ‘the *opus proprium* “translated” into worldly form is necessarily and properly the cross’.¹⁰⁷ The latter recognises that God is present *mit* und *unter*, (with and under), the contingent events of history, of manger and cross, but cannot be said to be *in* them. For Barth, God is his own interpreter and guarantees his self-revelation, which cuts through any historical ambiguity. To recognise revelation *in* that ambiguity itself, *in* the contingencies of history, is to cast a shadow over the sovereignty and freedom of God. Revelation is found in hiddenness, but the particular content of that hiddenness is not in any particular way revelatory: ‘All saving events are alike in containing the dialectic of veiling and unveiling; and this might well be called [...] a ‘homogenization’ of these events.’¹⁰⁸ Revelation is in principle, (for Barth according to Williams) determined by the sovereignty of God in such a way that its relation to history is at best ‘freely elected’, if not simply arbitrary. And as we have stressed, for Williams, revelation is very much bound up with history; it is *in* the struggles which historical ambiguity necessarily incites that revelation is discerned. There can be no concept of revelation defined in advance of the narrative of the events of revelation.

A further question that Williams holds over Barth’s dogmatics concerns the nature of the salvific events: are they pervaded by epistemological issues? Drawing on the work of Gustaf Wingren,¹⁰⁹ Williams ponders whether for Barth the fundamental problem that has to be overcome is one of knowledge; that the human predicament is essentially one of ignorance. Christ is God’s self-*communication* and what is

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁰⁹ Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in conflict* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958).

communicated is Man's inability to hear the Word, paradoxically revealed by that Word. The epistemological gulf between the divine and the human thus prompts the question 'How do we know?' and 'Where is this all revealed to us?'¹¹⁰ The answers are, as we have seen, substantially in Jesus Christ and derivatively in Scripture and preaching. Yet the biblical imagery, suggests Wingren (and Williams by implication), is that the fundamental antithesis is not between God and man, but God and the Devil (the active power of evil). Fallen man may find himself in a catastrophic situation, but 'it is not, as for Paul, strictly *tragic*'.¹¹¹ Incarnation becomes essentially *manifestation*, the Word has *assumed*, but not *become* flesh:

Not even in Christ can the gulf between God and man cease to exist, because God can never act *as* man or *in* man, only *through* man. And the paradoxical issue of all this is that we are left with a system in which human knowledge, not the activity of God, is central.¹¹²

The story of the man, Jesus from Nazareth, is thus relegated to a kind of background noise, perhaps even silence. The emphasis upon the compelling and irresistible nature of revelation in Barth seems to annihilate any theological significance in the created order; the world is a place of contingency and ambiguity, and for Barth, God can never be compromised by it. For Williams, this is perhaps only 'half' of what is to be said. The biblical testimony, the doctrinal struggles of the Church underpinned by an understanding of the doctrine of creation 'reveals' a God who shows *deference* to the world, even a fallen one and Christ stands at the edge, the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 127.

one who refuses, as in Dostoevsky, ‘the lures of “miracle, mystery and authority”’, as a means of the imposition of truth. Williams suggests that for Barth:

the emphasis is far less on the Son of Man given up into the hands of sinners, God at man’s mercy, than the judgment of God upon man. Barth will write eloquently of the suffering and dereliction of Jesus bearing the wrath of God; but not of Jesus as ‘God bearing the wrath of man’.¹¹³

We are thus brought back to the understanding that Williams has of revelation being concerned with our ‘learning about our learning.’ For revelation is ‘addressed not so much to a will called upon to submit to an imagination called upon to “open itself”’.¹¹⁴ There can be no theology from above, no imposition of divine truth into the world which bears no intrinsic relation to that world. To say that ‘God reveals himself’ is to say that that new and inexhaustible life and possibility which constitutes God’s freedom is manifested and encountered in the ordinary, in history, which is constituted by struggle, event, memory and ambiguity.

Revelation is neither above, nor below, but always *in*. For Williams, both Barth, and I would suggest Daniel Strange, offer a short-cut which leads not to the freedom of God encountered in the fragility of human flesh, but to the apparent transcendence of a God who makes his voice heard above the pandemonium of the world. Non-Christian religions as such are nothing more (or not much more) than part of that din.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 140.

¹¹⁴ Williams, *Trinity and Revelation*, p. 147.

Chapter 3: Christology: the Divine Question

In this chapter, I shall discover how, for Williams, Christ is God's disturbing question embodied in the world and witnessed to in the New Testament. Two works, *Christ on Trial* and *Resurrection*, are explored which reveal what might be called the *primal wound* of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We will see how, for Williams, any later and on-going Christological discourse, whether that be Chalcedon, the Barmen Declaration or the chatter of the Episcopal bench of the Church of England, is only truthful when it recognises that it is a wound and not, or at least not simply, bandage. I shall go on to explore how Williams warns us constantly against the collapsing of Christology into various forms of ideology and how 'Incarnation' can become a closed system and one that can only be rescued by the Christ who is revealed in 'negativity'. I shall then finally explore, in some detail, the essay 'The Finality of Christ' which will help us to understand how Rowan Williams' Christology shapes his approach to religious pluralism and takes us beyond the usual prescriptions of inclusivism. The previous chapter mapped the cautious grammar which Williams employs for our speaking about God. In this chapter God's speaking to us in Christ comes almost as a whisper, to be heard at the edge of human history, as a dying man on a cross. If Jesus Christ is what we bring to inter-faith encounter and understanding, then it is not as a clear answer to the 'problem' of religious pluralism, but as God's strange question. This strangeness, which for Williams is the source of our judgement and hope, disturbs all three 'text book' typologies.

Christ the Question

If 'God' was once a problem, for Christians the temptation is now to believe that we have the solution – Jesus Christ. However, just as Rowan Williams is constantly on

guard against allowing our divine grammar to slip into making God yet one more thing in the universe, his Christology is constantly battling against making Christ a familiar and manageable item in our religious vocabulary. For Williams, though God is incarnate in the person of Jesus, he is not so much the religious answer to our questions as the divine question that comes as judgement upon our religious answers. That mystery which we name with the word 'God' has for Williams, become *more* mysterious, more disturbing and strange in the one who stands naked on trial before the religious and political courts of the world and allows himself to be executed outside the city upon a cross. But if we think that the resurrection clears away this disturbance, then for Williams we would be gravely mistaken. As Benjamin Myers, commenting on Williams' ecclesiology, says:

If there is a real continuity between the church and Christ, it is the continuity between a wound and a surgeon's scalpel. The church is that traumatized community which God's intervention has left in the world – a wound for the world's healing.¹¹⁵

If God is somehow present in Jesus then we must be able to speak of the way in which the difference which God *is*, is to be found in him. Looking back to the previous chapter we noted that God, who creates *ex nihilo*, is both radically present and yet incommensurable with creation. We also noted that once we have established the limitations and parameters of how we may speak meaningfully about God, we must not fall into the trap of believing we have now developed a system whereby God maybe grasped, imagining we have, as David Burrell put it, 'an algorithm' by which to 'predict' him. Williams interprets the person and work of Christ using the same language. Jesus is present to us in the created order as 'an-other'. This of course

¹¹⁵ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 37.

immediately causes red lights to flash, for God cannot be *an*-other, and so we have the crisis of language and thinking, which is the origin of hundreds of years of doctrinal struggle by the Church. But just as God's immanence is only possible *because* God is transcendent, so Williams sees in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus a narrative that clearly is present to us in history, yet remains strange and is *undetermined* by the world's narrative. Jesus, though human, is radically free from our agenda in ways that reflect God's autonomy and sovereignty. What Williams believes comes increasingly into view in the pages of the New Testament and the evolution of the early Church is the recognition that Jesus initiates a new community that is beyond political, ethnic and religious tribalism. It is a redefinition of humanity itself, which reflects and expresses that which only God is able to do – to summon into existence, *ex nihilo*, a new people. The resurrection initiates a new way of being, a transformation of human relating that we call Church, but we are to remember that the One who is resurrected is also and always is the One we crucified. There is no simple happy ending to what was otherwise a tragic story of misrecognition, for as the resurrection appearances themselves show, that misrecognition continues. The Church is the community of the resurrection, which means it is a response to, and is constituted by the crucified, yet risen One. But again, the danger is for that very Church to imagine that it is itself the 'algorithm' that can possess and manipulate Christ. For Williams, the strangeness, the freedom and illusiveness of the risen Lord means that He is always beyond us.

The whole of the Christian tradition – prayer, liturgy, theology, mission – is to enable the world to hear the 'question' which God gives in Christ. The Gospel is not an abstract belief or a commitment to articulate and defend various ontological claims (though it may and does involve this); its identity is bound up with the transformation of human relating that Jesus Christ initiates and sustains. It is of fundamental

importance to his theological reflection that the disturbing narrative of Jesus of Nazareth is the generating core that forms and re-forms the Christian community. Doctrine, dogma, liturgy and preaching are there to keep the divine question alive.

Part One: Jesus, the Christ

We have seen how Williams emphasises the importance of history as the arena for discerning and responding to revelation. This too is fundamental to all of his Christological reflections. It is *the embodied Word* that generates Christology, i.e. the divine in history, encountered in the person of Jesus from Nazareth. Williams resists separating revelatory event from ongoing interpretation. Objectivity in history is not a picture of the past that has liberated the original event or person from ongoing colonisation by later generations. It is rather a ‘way of proceeding’¹¹⁶ that seeks to recognise how interpretation works. History has to be concerned with how contemporaries read and reacted to the phenomenon of their day. The ‘real’ in history is not what can be brought to light beneath layers of obscuring interpretation, for every piece of evidence, text, artefact and so on is already part of culture, part of sense-making schemes that prevailed at the time. ‘Part of the job of historical interpretation thus becomes the business of working out of how a person or event makes possible various readings and responses.’¹¹⁷ So for Williams, the question it poses is: what was it in the life of Jesus that provided the conditions for the kind of interpretation and beliefs that arose? He does of course recognise that this question is not answerable in exact historical terms,¹¹⁸ but what this question does mean is that:

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 145.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

There can be no discussion of a ‘real’ Jesus that does not raise this issue, even indirectly; whatever the events were, they began a process, one of whose outcomes was the New Testament.¹¹⁹

What the New Testament presents is the initial, tentative working out of what constitutes the identity of the community that gathers around the crucified, risen Christ, and at the heart of this struggle, is for Williams, I would suggest, two central concerns that can be expressed in different ways: the cross and resurrection, judgement and hope, *krisis* and *ekklesia*. *Krisis* or judgement, emerges supremely from the cross and *ekklesia* or Church from the resurrection. Yet both cannot be separate categories for Williams, but reflect each other, for the One who has been raised to new life is, and always is, the One who was put to death.

Krisis: Christ on Trial

For Williams, at the heart of the *krisis* as presented in the gospels is a mortal conflict between the claims that Jesus makes upon Israel as to its identity and vocation and the claims which the cultic religious system of Israel, *at that particular moment*, made for itself. For Williams, the conflict between Jesus and the ‘rulers of Israel’ do not represent two ‘religions’ (Judaism and Christianity) coming into collision but a moment that radically called into question the nature of what Israel was for God’s ‘meaning’ in the world. The person of Jesus and the response to and understanding of him by the nascent Church can *only* make sense set against this particular historical background.

In 2000, Rowan Williams published a short Lenten book entitled ‘*Christ on Trial*’.¹²⁰ Although, it is one of his more populist works, it does take us to the central themes

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

and concerns that run through the whole of his writings including those aimed at the Academy. What follows is a paraphrase of Williams' own distillation of the four gospel accounts of the trial of Jesus.

Williams reads Mark's Gospel¹²¹ as presenting a world that is not a reasonable one; it is full of abuse, violence and demonic powers. It is a world incapable of hearing the truth either about itself or God. The ministry of Jesus is presented as fast-paced, in which he moves rapidly from place to place, encounter to encounter, but where he is misunderstood and where, all too easily, what he has to say is commandeered into the terms and references of his hearers; and so Jesus holds back from revealing who he is (the Messianic Secret). He does so:

Because it seems, he cannot believe that there are words that will tell the truth about him in the mouths of others. What will be said of him will be bound to be untrue.¹²²

It is only at the very last, as Jesus stands before the High Priest, that he is free to speak. Stripped and bound before the court, he has no stake left in the world and how it understands and organises itself. It is at this moment, *and can only be at this moment*, that he speaks plainly about himself. He names himself with God's name, with the great 'I am' and reveals that he will come to judge. Williams concludes:

God's 'I am' can only be heard for what it really is when it has no trace of human power left to it, when it appears as something utterly different from

¹²⁰ Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-23

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

human authority, even human liberty, when it is spoken by a captive under sentence of death.¹²³

Williams picks up this fundamental theme in a recent publication, *Meeting God in Mark*.¹²⁴ Again he reads this moment as the focal point of Mark's gospel in which Jesus is saying that here stands God as a mortal human being and so the place of God is one of a rejected and helpless human being. No religious illusion can be sustained at this point, any hope for future in which Jesus might have found a place in this world, so that he could be accommodated by the world and co-opted into its language is stripped away. Yet this place of terrible darkness is also the place of light, for 'God has chosen to be, and to be manifest, at that lowest, weakest point of human experience'.¹²⁵ There is thus no place outside of God's love and presence.

In Matthew's Gospel,¹²⁶ Williams notes that the identity of Jesus is not so hidden, for the author is concerned to show that the Spirit of God is fully active in him as promised by the prophets. Jesus makes sense because of what is already known. In Matthew we see constant connections between what has been and what is, between Israel's past and the present moment. Matthew's narrative is one in which hidden harmonies are displayed, for Jesus is the hermeneutical key that unlocks a door through which we can enter into the fullness and coherence of the history of God's dealings with his people. Jesus is the divine *Sophia*, the Wisdom of God, and in his presentation of the trail of Jesus, Matthew will portray the rejection of that Wisdom. Mark's Jesus finally reveals who he is to the High priest. In Matthew, Jesus' response is more ambiguous, '*su eipas*', 'so you say'. However, Williams notes that there is an

¹²³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹²⁴ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014).

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 24-47.

edge to these words, for they turn the question back on to the questioner. The High Priest is using words drawn from the history of his people, deeply religious words, yet has no real understanding of what they truly mean. What is on trial in Matthew's gospel is the whole system of religious language. The words in the mouth of the High Priest are dead words and they can only bring death. They fail to recognise what it is they purport to most fully desire:

Wisdom is the most fundamental reality in creation and in the history of God's people and yet it is the hardest of things to recognise.¹²⁷

The *krisis* that Matthew's Jesus brings is our failure to recognise that Wisdom is embodied before us and is exposed to the pain and insecurity of life in the world, 'it means letting go of whatever it is that allows us to use the language of faith as a defence or weapon'.¹²⁸ Jesus is the Wisdom of God, stripped naked before the ideological world of religious language, which colludes with the world's violence. In Matthew Jesus is the divine Sophia, emptied of power before the powerful (*kenosis*), and so we have an emerging image of a 'kenotic victim'.

Luke's Gospel¹²⁹ is one that for Williams turns the world upside down. It is not, as often thought, a gospel aimed at the non-Jewish world, but one that is aimed at all those who do not belong, Jewish or Gentile. Jesus, for Luke, provokes questions about where the centre of things lie, and what is the nature of the boundaries we draw about the world and ourselves. He begins with a description of how the world understands itself; Caesar Augustus, Herod, Tiberius Caesar are all named, for these are the powerful and defining points of reference on the world's map. They are, however,

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 49-72.

quickly followed in Luke to references of a childless ageing couple, an unmarried village woman, an eccentric in the desert; figures on the outside, powerless and socially questionable. When Jesus is questioned by the Council to say if he is the Messiah his answer is, 'If I tell you, you will not believe me and if I question you, you will not answer'. Williams understands Jesus here as saying 'I have nothing to say to you that you will be able to hear or to which you are able to respond. Luke's Jesus places himself with those whose language cannot be heard'.¹³⁰ He is positioned with the outsider, but this is not to say, in some simple way, that the outsider is right and approved of more than the insider. Rather, 'God is in the connections we cannot make',¹³¹ and the sheer presence of those who do not fit remind us of the incomplete character of all systems, political and religious. Yet more than that, the Lucan narrative brings to the surface the failure of the world I have constructed in which others have been made scapegoats, victims and losers. For Luke's Jesus is himself the Outsider, one who cannot and will not fit into my religious framework, my way of making the world manageable, for that would 'let in the subtle temptation to treat my perspective *as if it were* God's'.¹³²

Williams sees almost the whole of John's Gospel¹³³ as a trial story. Jesus is constantly being questioned and interrogated and in these encounters he seeks to position himself against the self-referential and self-sufficient categories of his questioners. Williams is also highly sensitive to the apparent anti-Jewish stance of the gospel. He acknowledges the history of the gospel's reception which has included terrible forms of anti-Semitism, but he nevertheless suggests that John's narrative itself has a much

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹³² Ibid., p. 65.

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 72-94.

more self-subverting character, for in it ‘those who identify themselves as the ones who really believe or really know are also those who cannot bear the light of Christ’.¹³⁴

The fundamental issue is to do with who Jesus *is*. In this gospel, Jesus spends relatively little time on trial before the High Priest and instead the *krisis* is brought into full view as he stands before Pilate. The procurator asks ‘the most celebrated question in the whole New Testament: “What is truth?”’¹³⁵ It’s a question that cannot be answered using the language with which it is asked. Williams suggests authority is at question here: If Jesus is a King, what is the nature of his kingdom and how are we to imagine an authority that is not political and non-territorial? The truth of this kind of authority is that it is a ‘particular kind of freedom’.¹³⁶ And to live in this ‘Truth’ and so know this kind of freedom is to be living where Jesus lives. The Kingdom of Jesus is one that requires no defence against rivals and is radically undermined by the use of violence. It is one that cannot compete for space in this world. Those who live where Jesus lives are at home everywhere and nowhere. John’s Jesus asks of the reader to decide which kingdom they belong to. If it is in the kingdom where Jesus is King then the world will be animated and made sense of by creation’s self-gift, the Word that has become flesh. To live in Pilate’s Kingdom is to live in a world of rivalry and violence and so of darkness, for it is always bound to various sorts of untruthfulness, the most fundamental of which ‘is the all-pervasive myth that the otherness of God is a threat to its integrity and safety’.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

What all four gospels and their accounts of the trial of Jesus challenge us to recognise is what it is for God to be present to us and to speak to us *as* God. They make the claim that He is seen most clearly in situations which seem most hopeless, where all possible (human) success is no longer present, and where what is salvific is absolutely not the way of this world. Thus, our talk of divine transcendence is radically altered for:

To understand and appropriate the transcendence of God, precisely at the moment when no worldly condition secures or makes sense of this, is the fullest historical testimony there could be to what his divinity involves.¹³⁸

Ekklesia and Resurrection

Krisis does not end at the crucifixion, but continues and must continue in the resurrection, for the one who has risen is ‘this Jesus’ whom you have killed. In *Resurrection*¹³⁹ Williams explores the nature of the resurrection as presented in the New Testament witness. The book emerged from a series of Lenten lectures given in the East End of London in 1981. They were aimed at a mainly clerical audience and so the book, rather like *Christ on Trial*, is not aimed at the Academy, but at the Church. It is not, as Williams acknowledges in the Introduction, a ‘work of scientific New Testament exegesis’, it is rather a discussion of the ‘variety of significant patterns and imaginative approaches to the question of what it meant and what it means to say that Jesus, who was deserted and executed, is alive with God and also

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

¹³⁹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982).

present to his followers'.¹⁴⁰ In what follows I shall paraphrase William's work, drawing out the essential points.

Williams begins by drawing our attention to the first preaching of the resurrection, which, according to Luke-Acts, takes place in Jerusalem, the city in which Jesus was condemned. As such the audience for this preaching is not a neutral one, for they have blood on their hands. The house of Israel and the gentile rulers gathered here are all implicated in the execution of Jesus and so the apostles come to pronounce the sentence of God upon them, for the one now raised from the dead has been vindicated by God: 'He returns as the judge of his judgers'.¹⁴¹ Yet this is not a reversal of roles in which the victim now has the upper hand and returns to exact revenge. The risen Christ is presented by the disciples not as threat, but as promise and hope and their invitation is to see that 'grace is released when the judges *turn* to their victim and recognise him as their hope and saviour'.¹⁴² What is more, the victimisation of Jesus has continued in the persecution of the followers of Jesus. Saul, the great persecutor of the nascent Church is shown to have recognised that the One who revealed himself on the road to Damascus is 'Jesus, whom you are persecuting'. Jesus *is* the one whom Paul has been oppressing. Williams concludes that 'a provisional definition of the primary stage in preaching the resurrection [is] an invitation to recognise one's victim as one's hope'.¹⁴³

Yet if not simply a reversal of roles, then what? It's something much more radical and strange, which moves beyond the re-arrangement of power relationships. Jesus

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 11.

‘embodies the condition of pure victim’.¹⁴⁴ In ordinary human relationships the boundaries between oppressor and victim are fluid. Jesus, however, does not use counter-violence of any sort in response to those who condemned him, ‘his life is defined as embodying an unconditional and universal acceptance, untrammelled by social, ritual or racial exclusiveness’.¹⁴⁵ Jesus is judge because he is victim, yet he is the judge who will not condemn and so ‘the divine judgement of the world is *not* delivered from a supernatural plane, but is enacted within the relations of human beings to each other’,¹⁴⁶ in other words, *in* history. Williams sees here the beginning of an understanding that only Jesus, pure victim, who is the non-condemning judge, who can ‘carry’ the divine love and does so as the condition and possibility of the *transformation* of the human world and its relationships of violence and oppression. Human systems of justice, in their attempt to repair the breach in the world caused by even the most appalling acts of violence, create a fresh breach, in which new victims are created. But the risen Christ is ‘there as the “unfinishedness” of our relation to the criminal, as the muted question, the half-cry for some unimaginative qualitative leap into reconciliation’.¹⁴⁷ The resurrected Jesus transcends our systems of justice, he will not act against us; here is ‘the righteousness that makes righteous’.¹⁴⁸ What is being brought to light in the resurrection is the endless and complex cycles of mutual rejection and excluding violence and we are born into a world in which this is *already* the case and it is ‘this “already” which theology [...] refers to as original sin – the sense of primordial “diminution” from which we all suffer before we are capable of

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

understanding or choice'.¹⁴⁹ Here, sin is not a reference to our individual moral failings; it is rather a 'universal vision of tragic disorder'.¹⁵⁰ The resurrected Jesus reveals the depths of that disorder and the violence and destructiveness it produces that is written into the human narrative and instead offers a new narrative that transcends the old. Yet the resurrection of Jesus, in the hands of Williams, is not a straightforward event that can be reduced to 'believing that it did or did not happen'. It is an event that is about rupture in both language and in human self-understanding. This begins with the Jesus whom we have crucified, being preached in Jerusalem, where the specific memory of his death is still in the public memory. It is this man and no other that God has raised and vindicated, his way of living and dying is now shown to be an expression of who God is for us, and so begins the process by which the particularity of Jesus becomes the point of universal access to a transforming interpretation of all human life.

God is that to which all things are present, Williams insists¹⁵¹— *All things*, including the past. In the preaching of the resurrection, the memory of the crucified is brought into the present for those who had condemned Jesus. But as Christianity spread in both space and time, Williams suggests it is all of our memory, our history that is brought into the resurrected life, for 'God is the agency that gives us back our memories'.¹⁵² What this affirms through the whole of his writings, is that neither the individual, nor the corporate are timeless 'substances' operating by pure will and reason; both have histories that make them what they are. Those histories embody 'diminution' and failure and participate and collude with the world's violence. The

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 33.

¹⁵¹ Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 29.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 29.

parts we choose to remember are always permeated with deceit, for they are a self-justifying tale. Williams sees this as fundamental to understanding the resurrection appearances in Galilee. The risen Lord, for example, comes to Peter, the one who has denied and ran away and meets him in his failure, and so Peter has to recognise himself as betrayer, for ‘memory is never simply the recovery of lost innocence’.¹⁵³ What Peter must learn to see is that his betrayal does not make God betray, and he can only be sent out as an apostle as one who has himself been forgiven. Vocation and forgiveness therefore occur together. Memory of failure is given back in the particular context of the risen Jesus. All the disciples, before they can become apostolic, are preached to by the resurrected Jesus in whom their resistance to the truth is brought to light and yet also transformed by and through him:

As we learn the truth of [our] tragic character, we learn also that the tragedy is interwoven with hope. The truth incarnate, present in the human world, is instantly, inevitably, entangled with the luxuriant tendrils of human fantasy and self-deceit.¹⁵⁴

The gospel provokes *krisis*, but also forgiveness, which is not to be understood as a word of acquittal but as a ‘transformation of the world of persons’.¹⁵⁵ So, we begin to see the foundations of *Ekklesia*, of Church, which is for Williams the community (communities?) of the resurrection. The risen Lord, who possesses ‘all authority in heaven and upon earth’ sends out the apostles to baptise the nations of the world, to create a new kind of community whose limits are nothing less than the whole of humanity gathered around Christ, who is not just risen but is *with* us. The Galilean resurrection appearances are not private visitations, but as we have begun to see they

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

are, for Williams, that which calls into being a set of new relationships, 'resurrection faith is inseparable from the existence of a historical community characterised by certain styles of relation'.¹⁵⁶ The object and ground of that community's faith is not its own life, it is a response to the empty tomb and the encounters with the risen Jesus, but this is made visible and intelligible to us through that very community, the *ecclesia* which is generated.

However, the resurrection appearances of Jesus, Williams notes, are not straightforward. Jesus is presented as tangible; he sits with his disciples and eats with them and allows, indeed encourages, them to touch him, yet he appears and disappears at will. The appearances begin with misrecognition, and so a kind of *otherness* is encountered in the very unrecognizability of the risen Jesus; *he is not their familiar friend returned to them, he comes as a stranger*. Williams suggests that this is a vital piece of evidence 'counting against the suggestion that the risen Christ is to be seen as a projection of the community's own belief, its sense of continuity with the identity of Jesus'.¹⁵⁷ The *ekklesia* is not an attempt to preserve the memory of Jesus, it is the community of those who meet him as risen, and in that encounter find their own lives being transformed. He is both with them and beyond them and so not their possession. Jesus gives a 'solid identity' to us in the *ekklesia*, yet:

Refuses us the power to 'seal' or finalise it [...] to absolutise it, imagining that we have finished the making of ourselves, that we have done with desire and restlessness, is to slip back into that unredeemed world, to turn from the void of the tomb to the drama of a cheapened Calvary for the frustrated ego.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

The *ekklesia* is to be found in its risen Lord, but he is not simply found in it.

A non-territorial God, the recognition of the incomplete nature of all (religious) systems, a risen Christ who is beyond our grasp and the creation of a new humanity – as we shall go on to see, these are some of the key building blocks of William’s theological vision. In his hands they will enable us to re-imagine the question of religious pluralism.

Et Verbum Caro Factum Est

Judgment and hope, *Krisis* and *Ekklesia* are brought about by Jesus, crucified and risen. The New Testament witness clearly understands that because of the man from Nazareth something unique, decisive and universal has come into the world. But how exactly should we understand the person of Jesus himself? Williams notes the extravagant language that is very quickly being used about Jesus in the New Testament – Logos, wisdom, Second Adam, etc. There is a straining of language that for Williams moves awkwardly and slowly toward the notion that ‘the creator of the universe is at work without interruption in the life and work of Jesus’.¹⁵⁹ And so, we are brought to the heat and conflict of the Christological debates.

Williams understands the divine as being and always being generative.¹⁶⁰ God is not and cannot be generated, God is free from all outside agency and as such is radically ‘other’ to this world. Jesus clearly is not, for he belongs to the world and its language just as all human beings do. His words, his actions, his ministry and his life are part of that same contingent, finite narrative we call history. Questions therefore sharply emerge as to how it is possible, and in what way is it meaningful, to say that

¹⁵⁹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2007), p. 62-63.

¹⁶⁰ Rowan Williams, ‘Trinity and Revelation’ in *OCT* pp 131-147

that which is always generative and *never* generated can be present in history?

Williams suggests that in the anti-Arian wing of the Church these questions were understood as being about the derivative nature of the heavenly Logos. A distinction was drawn between being ‘derived’ or dependent and being created.¹⁶¹ Jesus was indeed understood as being dependent without reducing what was at work in him as being thought inferior. This was to say that there is a ‘proper liberty generated out of dependence, a proper creativity which is *responsive* rather than simply initiatory’.¹⁶² In Christ there was recognised a creativity, which in ‘comparable generality’¹⁶³ is a response and reflection of the absolute creativity of God. This ‘reflected divine creativity’ was manifested in Christ’s re-forming of a people and the boundaries of what human being means in ways which exceeded and was not contained by the history of which Jesus was a part. As Williams says:

Without ceasing to *be* an inheritor of that history and a member of that society, he acknowledges as his ‘limit’ only the will of the God he calls Father: his liberty is itself a function of his obedience. So Jesus shares the creativity of God, yet not as a ‘second God’, a separate *individual*: he is God as dependent – for whom the metaphors of Word, image, Son are appropriate.¹⁶⁴

God’s life is being translated into another medium, and indeed Williams sees this as a helpful analogy to the relationship between the divine and the human in Jesus in the world of music. A great performer is one who brings all their skill and concentration into bringing into life the work and vision of another person. Performers remain utterly themselves and indeed the performance shows them to be fully alive, fully

¹⁶¹ Trinity and Revelation, p. 139.

¹⁶² Trinity and Revelation, p. 140.

¹⁶³ Trinity and Revelation, p. 139.

¹⁶⁴ Trinity and Revelation, p. 140.

engaged, and yet the whole of their being is taken up with this ‘other’, the work that is being brought to life in the performance. In *Tokens of Trust*, Williams suggests that Jesus:

Is performing God’s love, God’s purpose, without a break, without a false note, without a stumble, yet he is never other than himself, with all that makes him distinctly human taken up with this creative work.¹⁶⁵

This is exactly what was being wrestled with at Chalcedon. The Arian model was one that was thought ultimately to be inadequate to this understanding of the ‘performance’, for it limited the full range of possibilities that the Christian narrative offered. Instead what was recognised by the Council was that divinity and humanity existed together in the one coherent life of Jesus as non-competitive realities, and that his ‘subjecthood’ or personhood was constituted by the divine Word. Williams stands by this understanding.

Incarnation as Ideology

The danger now is to believe that the Church, in its doctrinal statements and dogmatic utterances, has reached a conclusion. After a long and difficult debate involving much conflict, Chalcedon is an expression of the *Ekklesia* finally getting a command on the data and providing itself with a settled account. Williams is all too aware of how incarnation can become (particularly for Anglicans) the basis of that conclusion. In his paper *Beginning with the Incarnation*¹⁶⁶ such an attitude is firmly rejected. The Incarnation *in itself* is ‘in danger of being a rather baroque formulation relating to the

¹⁶⁵ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁶ Rowan Williams, ‘Beginning with the Incarnation’ in *Open to Judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 79-92.

origin of Jesus' "earthly" career'.¹⁶⁷ The doctrine of the Incarnation, if it is to be truthful, cannot be abstracted from the 'encounter and judgement present in the entirety of Jesus' story, which is itself the source of the pressure towards dogmatic utterance'.¹⁶⁸ To begin with the Incarnation is to fall into the trap, highlighted in the previous chapter, of understanding revelation as something from above, that which is inserted into history, but which is not part of history. Yet, for Williams, we must also not fall into the trap of disconnecting the particular story of Jesus from its ongoing reception, as though Christ was one symbol amongst many of what it means to speak of God. The 'pressure' of the narrative of Jesus pushes the Church toward dogmatic utterance. That dogmatic utterance in turn, keeps us rooted in the Pascal story. That story is one of *Krisis* and *Ekklesia*, of loss and recovery and so dogmatic utterance is to take us to a 'place' where worship and spirituality allow us not to be afraid of silence and powerlessness. Dogma is meant to make our talk of God more difficult in order that such talk gives place to the freedom of God.

This 'making difficult' is not, for Williams, that of deliberately trying to construct immensely complex conceptual structures of creed and definitions, but the way in which dogma places before the Church large and strange images, such as baptism, regeneration, sin, or indeed incarnation, 'that indicate a wider world of understanding than mere functionalism and subjectivism about religious language allow for'.¹⁶⁹

Unlike liberalism, the concern here is not to make religious words familiar and 'relevant' but to recognise how strange they are, to cease to take them for granted.

Just as the risen Christ comes to his disciples as a stranger, dogma can only bring the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

Church to judgement when it no longer is familiar. Dogma, like the resurrection itself, refuses closure.

This in turn gives us a clue as to why, for Williams, Nicaea and Chalcedon hold the place they do in Christianity. Why this particular way of speaking about who Jesus Christ is? Why not an Arian or a Nestorian Christ? Williams suggests that it was their essential openness that gives them their authority; it was what they made possible ‘rather than with a notion that they have closed the debate forever’.¹⁷⁰ The claim that Jesus is *verus Deus*, *verus homo* was not in the early church a debate over the truth of that belief in isolation, but was interwoven with a number of conflicts ‘turning upon and issuing in a set of liturgical and disciplinary conventions, decisions about what may and may not publically be said in the Church’s name about Jesus Christ’.¹⁷¹ There was no simple straightforward coherent Christological theory and in fact a far greater flexibility in the status and ‘register’ of agreed formulae. Williams again draws us back to the Christological *Krisis*; the confession that Jesus is Lord has its roots in the imagery of the apocalyptic tribunal, which sets before us both in narrative and in liturgical expression:

A set of transactions in which we are invited to find our role and our truth [...] we have some resources for dealing with the question of what is and what is not consistent, and thus with what is or is not a fruitful elaboration of the basic confession.¹⁷²

So, a Jesus who was simply *verus Deus* would be one in which the flesh was mere clothing upon the inner supernatural being, when the story tells us that Jesus was

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 90.

vulnerable in spirit and flesh to ways in which all human beings ‘like you and me betray and kill each other in spirit and flesh’.¹⁷³ His authority as Lord is dependent upon how he himself lived through the risk of mortality. Equally Jesus, as simply *verus homo*, would be one who has offered the world a fresh and exemplary way of living, which nevertheless ignored “‘the crisis and failure of the cross, and the divine reversal of human judgement at Easter’,¹⁷⁴ which in turn fails to reveal, let alone respond to that endless human cycle of violence and retribution in which human life is diminished. If we are to say that Jesus is intermittently *verus Deus* and *verus homo*,¹⁷⁵ then God’s self communication depends on the unpredictable and erratic ‘good moments’ in Jesus’ life and returns us once again to the unsatisfactory model of Jesus as example and symbol. And so Williams asks, ‘Do any of these options, in short, articulate what it is to be drawn into cross and resurrection and to find there [...] at once a decisive No and an everlasting Yes to ourselves?’¹⁷⁶ Nicaea and Chalcedon respond to that question in a way that other options closed down. What cannot be guaranteed in the doctrinal formulas of the Church is an ‘objective truth’ that operates outside of the life of the Church and its engagement with the world. For Williams, there is a sense that what saves us from the potential self-referential and circularity of these discussions (the pressure of the Jesus narrative pushes us toward Chalcedon, Chalcedon pushes us back to its founding pressure) is in fact the very ability of that circularity to happen dialectically, for the ‘classical dogmatic tradition has served to keep the essential questions alive’¹⁷⁷ in ways which were not simply in the Church’s *control*, which alternative styles would have prematurely foreclosed. As such the

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 92.

Christological question which the Church brings to interfaith encounter must also open up, rather than close down. It must bring us constantly back to the primal wound of Jesus Christ and not a finished ontology in which answers are given before a question is asked.

Part Two: The Finality of Christ

In the introduction to this thesis, I outlined my task as giving an exposition of the ‘foundational commitments’ in the theology of Rowan Williams. Though the next chapter will explore a vital and indispensable part of that foundation – the Holy Spirit – we can already begin to see how something of those commitments shape the approach Williams has to other religious traditions. What is it, one may ask, that Christian faith brings to the table in inter-faith encounter and dialogue? Jesus Christ is, and can only be the answer, but not as a finished ontology, into which all other religious (and secular) language is subsumed, or simply rejected. Rather, it is Jesus Christ, the ‘Divine Question’ who is neither ‘the answer to everything’ nor the supreme example and symbol of *gnosis*, of spiritual knowledge. For Williams:

Jesus does not have to mean everything; his ‘universal significance’ is a universally crucial question rather than a comprehensive ontological schema.

We may still want to confess that in Christ ‘all things cohere’, but it is possible to understand this as saying, not that ‘in Christ all meanings are contained’ but that ‘on Christ’s judgement all histories converge.’¹⁷⁸

Incarnational language that moves quickly to ontology becomes a symptom of the very condition that the judgement of Christ reveals; the turning in on itself of religious speech, so that it becomes self-referential and self-contained. Any

¹⁷⁸ Williams, *The Finality of Christ*, p. 94.

ontological meaning of Christ could only show itself in a single culture which was ‘freely communicating’¹⁷⁹ whereby the extraordinary diversity and richness of human culture was animated by the identity of Jesus. In other words, this would be an eschatological vision, but for Williams, ‘a finished account of Christ as containing all meanings would make Christology non-eschatological.’¹⁸⁰ So rather than a move to ontology, Williams in agreement with Cornelius Ernst,¹⁸¹ suggests that we understand the universality and decisiveness of Christ in terms of him being God’s ‘substantive’ meaning for the reciprocal relationship between God and human beings. God is that which, eschatologically, secures a human community that is not tribal and in which there is unlimited communication, sharing and understanding, and for Williams ‘the Christian claim is that this sense is, practically and historically, given in Jesus’.¹⁸² The question for interfaith dialogue and encounter is how does the Church’s commitment to what has been given in this very specific historical narrative, make ‘itself audible and intelligible beyond the bounds of the Christian institution?’¹⁸³

Williams suggests that somewhere in the murky and shameful relationship between Christianity and Judaism, there lies a real but elusive clue to help move us beyond the clichés of the three-fold paradigm.¹⁸⁴ That relationship begins in the New Testament itself, where we are told that Jesus was God’s response to Israel’s hope for restoration and deliverance, but that those who commanded the political and religious machinery of the time were simply unable to appreciate that fulfilment in their midst, finding it both unrecognisable and profoundly menacing. The response was not only to reject

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 93-95.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 97ff

the offer of God embodied in Jesus, but to annihilate it and it is only those who can now begin to see in the person and presence of the risen Jesus God's vindication of him, and that the *ekklesia* gathered around him is the new 'Israel', 'a people in whose common life the purpose of God for God's human creation is made manifest'.¹⁸⁵ Read in this light, the story does in fact seem to affirm the 'Christ who is container of all meanings', for 'Christianity' has revealed the untruthfulness of its parent religious tradition 'Judaism' and has replaced it with its more comprehensive and truthful ontology. This analysis is one that is discernible in the pages of the New Testament documents and one that can be read on many pages of the history of the Church. Williams suggests, however, that the story is actually far more complex, even as presented in the New Testament.

Firstly, there was no such 'thing' as Judaism or Christianity at the time. There was no *religion*, or *religions* in competition with each other, at least if we understand those terms to mean 'a unified system of beliefs and rituals with its own frame of reference over against other forms of thinking and behaving',¹⁸⁶ in other words, how modernity reads 'religion', then such language is anachronistic. As such there was no *collision of systems*, but there was an episode of decisive significance in the religious and political history of a people whose corporate life was connected by shared myths, liturgy and a history of struggle and conflict. Williams suggests that what the earliest Christian communities claimed was that those shared stories, myths and liturgical practice were compelling Israel to a greater unity and coherence, which would truly embody the absolute fidelity of God and the people and the eradication of practices that prevented such a vision to be made real. This was of course a recognisable prophetic theme in

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

the story of Israel, but combined with the eschatological pressures of the time, it created a powerful convergence on the person of Jesus who very quickly came to be seen as inaugurating the new Israel. Again, we see Williams stressing the way in which this specific configuration of historical factors presses toward the recognition of something that was decisive and ‘God-like’:

Jesus’ position vis-à-vis Israel moves closer towards that of the divine initiator, the course of the primal liberation and promise, *the maker of the people as a people*.¹⁸⁷

The ‘failure’ of Israel is thus not one of a scheme of timeless religious ideas and beliefs called ‘Judaism’ which rejected Jesus. There is rather a deadly confrontation between the claim Jesus makes on Israel’s identity and the way in which those who held religious and political power at that specific moment produced and maintained that identity. The elusive question, Williams suggests, is one that exposes the failure of religious language and systems to actually be free and able to recognise that which is true to their own nature and calling. The fulfilment for which Israel had longed and which the religious powers were waiting had become so obscured and corrupted over time that they no longer had any means of recognising what that fulfilment would look like. ‘In the language of Amos, the desired Day of the Lord has come and is darkness and not light’.¹⁸⁸ And so, the very basic question at the heart of the foundational Christian myth is one that reveals the self referential, self-enclosed and self-justifying nature of ‘religious meanings’. This question of Christian belief, Williams suggests, is not an abstract and general one, it emerges in the very specific circumstances of the historical narrative of Israel, in which a particular people had

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 97, (my italics).

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

been summoned to manifest what human life should look like in ways which were open and responsive to the initiatory power ‘that lies behind all contingent events and agencies, and understanding [and] that the effect of that pressure is *tsedakah* and *shalom*, equitable and healing relations’.¹⁸⁹ In summoning a new people, a re-assembling of Israel around the person who had been executed by the religious and political machinery, Christianity had understood the crucified, risen Lord to have refined this question so that it freed religious language and meaning so as to become accessible for all, liberated from cultic and political mystification:

In other words, it is prepared to lose the God who is ‘our’ God, and who is protected as such by institutional safeguards.¹⁹⁰

Yet here again for Williams, the Church has become a symptom of the very spiritual disease of which it imagines itself to be the cure. For it too has throughout its history and theology made itself to be, not a community of universal access, an undefended place which is non-territorial (we are reminded of the trial of Jesus in John’s gospel), but instead it has, comparing itself with the ‘old Israel’, made of itself a ‘counter-claim to be a “peculiar people”, possessed of unique and exclusive access to the purpose of God’.¹⁹¹ *Incarnation* is thus used to ground a finality to the Church that has domesticated it into its own system of control; it has become an ideology. The Church, therefore, has no right of to question the continued existence of Israel as a people, since it has itself so commonly offered only yet another form of tribalism on a larger and more destructive scale, in which Christ has been used as the symbolic justification.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 99.

With failure apparently on every side, where does this leave us? For Williams, it takes us to that difficult and profoundly strange starting point expressed by Gerard Loughlin:

At the heart of the Christian mystery is the full emptiness, the divine absence enacted and disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁹²

It is only because we have *this* narrative of a life, lived in complete and utter dependency, obedience and response to God enacted in the world of religious and political meanings, that we have that which tests our words, actions and answers. Christology has at its foundation, in the thought of Rowan Williams, the endlessly difficult (and hopeful) task of preserving an edge between ideology and the possibility of open and truthful speaking about God. The Church, in its institutional life, in word and in sacrament, therefore, is committed to its own questionability, even a ‘spirituality of negation and absence’¹⁹³ in which there is a refusal of all attempts at a finished ontology:

And because of this, it is not free to claim finality for itself; there are things it does not say, meaning it does not carry.¹⁹⁴

Picking up on Dorothee Solle’s work, *Christ the Representative*,¹⁹⁵ Williams too suggests that the Church is that community which is to live in provisionality; it is what promises the world to God, ‘because the world’s future is already represented by

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 100 and taken from Gerard Loughlin, ‘Noumenon and Phenomenon’, *Religious Studies* 23 (1988), pp. 493-508.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁹⁵ Dorothee Solle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the Death of God* (London: SCM, 1967)

Christ'.¹⁹⁶ A messiah who has come, Solle suggests, is one that enables non-Jews to become Jews, which means to be able to live in postponement, to live eschatologically. Williams pushes the question further and asks whether this also means that Christ enables Jews to become Jews¹⁹⁷ and recognises that this is indeed the logical outcome of where his thought leads. However, this is not in relation to the essence of messianic Judaism *per se*, but in relation to specific points in Jewish politico-religious history, such as the time in which Jesus lived, as well as aspects of messianism in contemporary Israel. Insofar as Christ enables Jews to be Jews, it is not because he absorbs all and every meaning, but because he is that question on which all histories converge. But of course, yet again, Christianity is on dangerous ground, for offering a crucified messiah as hope to Jewish people as the judgement of ideology seems, to say the least, somewhat ironic and precarious in the face of the *Shoah*. The record of Christian anti-Semitism reveals only too clearly the failure of the Church to carry the question of Christ with much consistency and self-reflection. For Williams, it is again, however, the Christ who eludes our control and need for finality that, despite Auschwitz, enables the possibility of Christians to re-imagine Jesus through the medium of the Jewish experience. It is the victims of the Holocaust that reveal Christ to Christians:

Christ may indeed speak for the authentic vocation of God's people, to show the pressure of God's reality in the shape of a corporate human life of justice and hopefulness; but the Jewish people, as victims of Christians and post-Christian ideological closure, speak for Christ to Christians in the name of God who is not a Christian, reminding Christians of their 'Jewish' vocation to

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

embody that community of Justice between human beings that is God's purpose.¹⁹⁸

Israel has resisted absorption into Christendom and for Williams that refusal is essential for the Church to be the Church, for it keeps open that which Christianity would close down and finalise. Yet the Church's proclamation that Jesus is the substantive meaning of God's relation to the world is also the question that is put to Jewish and indeed all forms of privatised and self-protecting and self-justifying religious meaning. The very scandalous particularity of the story of the Word made flesh is what thwarts the human desire for totalised meaning. As Williams says, 'Jesus 'uniquely' reveals the God whose nature is not to make the claim of unique revelation as total and authoritative meaning'.¹⁹⁹

The Christology of Rowan Williams thus disrupts the established pattern of theological thinking generated by the three-fold paradigm. Though he is clearly orthodox in his thought, for him what I have referred to as the primary wound of Christ does not allow for any premature ontological or indeed epistemological imperialism in which Christ becomes the fulfilment of all other religious traditions. The Pascal Mystery is indeed *decisive* in the history of all religious meanings, but as their judgement and the possibility of their convergence. Christ is also *universal*, in that in him we have enacted out in history the unrestricted life of God, which re-creates the whole of humanity in his image. But what we do not have is a *finality* of Christ in which nothing more needs to be said or discovered. For what is revealed in Jesus, crucified and risen, is the working out of a moment of dispossession – 'a religious tradition generating its own near-negation, holding in precarious

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

juxtaposition the faithfulness of God and the alienness and freedom of God'.²⁰⁰ The dark and tragic history of Jewish-Christian relations, for Williams, paradoxically generates a shaft of light onto the questions of religious pluralism, in which a clear rejection of supersessionism becomes a theological requirement of cross and empty tomb.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

Chapter 4: The Holy Spirit and the Trinity

Despite the caution with which the Church should speak about God and Jesus, Father and Son, we can at least have some sense of what we are talking about. God the Father as *creator*, as the author and source of all that is has a certain resonance, even though it may not permit anything about who and what God *is* in God's-self to be deduced. God the Son, Jesus Christ, has a narrative, like us, which despite the ambiguities of history presents us with something that has recognisable content and so communicates and enables discourse. God the Holy Spirit, however, seems far more vague: 'Spirit' is as Williams concedes a 'weak and unspecific word, lending itself to much confusion'.¹ The Spirit is all too easily spoken off as grace in general, or as a *power* that bestows spiritual gifts, rather than as the fourth century Church struggled to articulate, the Spirit as a person, an agent. How then does Williams make sense of what the Christian tradition is speaking of when it uses the language of Spirit, and why is it that to speak of Father and Son *only* is not enough? Does the Christian language of the Spirit close down or might it unexpectedly open up the recognition of his 'presence' in other religious traditions? What then is the relationship between the Spirit and pluralism?

We should not be surprised to discover that the theology of the Holy Spirit with which Williams works, takes us deeper into the mystery of the divine, indeed beyond 'God', to the Trinitarian life itself and to the realisation that there is no unknown 'God' beyond that Trinitarian life. Williams rejects the apophatic as being apprehended in that which is encountered *beyond* the Trinitarian terms in an inaccessible *ousia* that stands somewhere behind Father, Son and Spirit. There are not three modes of divine

¹ Williams, *Word and Spirit*, p. 126.

life that can come into some kind of focus behind which lies a nature that evades all knowing. As Williams says, ‘any division of God’s life into the bit you can see and the bit you can’t see is unsustainable’.² It is the Holy Spirit as the excess of divine love that constitutes the Trinity as God. In other words, the Holy Spirit cannot be incidental to the Christian faith but is always fundamental to its nature. Yet pneumatology has so often been the Cinderella of Christian theology through the centuries and Williams himself acknowledges that it was only during his doctoral research on Lossky that he had for the first time to *think* about the life and work of the Spirit.³ Yet despite the crucial nature of pneumatology, it is an area of Christian reflection which Williams sees as often ending up in a *cul de sac*, and there are two reasons for this beyond the simple *weakness* of the term Spirit itself.

Firstly, the Spirit is understood to be the answer to a *problem*, one of distance between God and the world, but this for him, as we shall see, is to begin in the wrong place. The demanding and difficult, yet joyful and hopeful life of the Spirit does not emerge from complex abstract schemes that attempt to overcome a space between creator and creation. It is rather to enter into a life of witness and grace hovering between suffering and hope that the primal wound of Christ opens up in the world. As we examine Williams’ thought more closely we shall observe how he begins by resolutely refusing to interpret the life of the Spirit as being that of a mediator. We shall examine the way in which he charts the movement away from this bogus beginning to an understanding of the Holy Spirit as that which gives substance to our otherwise anaemic language of *spirituality*.

² Rowan Williams, ‘The deflections of desire: Negative theology in Trinitarian Disclosure’, in *Silence and the Word*, ed. by O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³ Rowan Williams, *A Margin of Silence* p.(i).

Secondly, he also insists that the work and presence of the Spirit is too easily reduced to exceptional experiences such as ecstatic utterances and speaking in tongues, which again is a diminishment of the spiritual. As we shall see, for Williams, the Spirit's distinguishing work, which comes to us as gift, is the transformation of the ordinary by which we are made to share in the relation between Father and Son. Drawing on his considerable knowledge and understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy, we shall detect William's use of its theologians in giving shape to the life and language of the Spirit. In the final section we shall investigate and illuminate an understanding of the Spirit as that which establishes God's life as being utterly Trinitarian and we shall also begin to see how that very Trinitarian life offers *the* ground for *all* pluralism, which will be more fully explored in the next chapter.

Turning East

In the short publication, *A Margin of Silence*⁴, Williams draws out elements of the pneumatology of three Orthodox thinkers, Lossky, Florensky and Bulgakov. The essay is a summary of their respective core theological commitments and it is not always clear how far Williams does and does not concur exactly with them. But as we shall see, each theologian generates themes which Williams certainly improvises upon in his own writings and which we shall elucidate with more detail as this chapter progresses.

Florensky, Williams suggests, points to the poverty of theologies of the Holy Spirit even in the Orthodox tradition, which has traditionally placed a greater emphasis on its agency than the Western Church. Florensky acknowledges that the Spirit is spoken of in the context of prayer, asceticism and discipline with great energy in the East, but

⁴ Rowan Williams, *A Margin of Silence* (Quebec: Lye Vert, 2008)

is only known negatively outside of those things. This suggests a failure to do justice to the personality and agency of the Spirit. Williams interprets this inadequacy as reflecting the over-determination of a Lucan theology of the Spirit, where the emphasis of pneumatology is on power and continuation (see below).

Williams picks up on Florensky's idea of three stages in world history that correspond in some way to the three persons of the Trinity. The Father 'is' the cultural apprehension of God where origins, ancestry and legitimation are a priority. The Son, or Word, is culturally expressed by the apprehension of coherence, law, order and harmony. The Spirit is apprehended when freedom and creativity break in. As Williams points out, Florensky is not attempting to identify three sequential epochs, but rather levels of awareness which belong everywhere at all times. What Williams wishes to draw from Florensky is the recognition that faith is not simply about order and harmony, but the new and the unexpected, and indeed the Spirit reveals 'the importance of discontinuity, of unexpectedness: the random'.⁵ As such, the Spirit is a distinct agent within the divine life, and Florensky makes a critical connection between that agency and the Kingdom: 'The Kingdom of God is the level or the realm of human life before God where liberty and creativity come to their fullness in human beings'.⁶ That coming and movement is the agency of the Spirit, but we are reminded that it is a movement towards full life *en Christou*. It is not a blind searching upwards, but is animated by a power that can only be understood as personal. 'The Spirit is manifest in the in-breaking of what is inexhaustible',⁷ but not in generalisations and universals, but rather in the lives of persons. This is for Williams a crucial point and

⁵ Williams, *Margin of Silence*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

one that we will see in the next chapter he himself takes up in his dialogue with Raymund Pannikar.

A rich vein of thought is to be mined by Williams in the writings of Sergei Bulgakov, with its emphasis on the Spirit as being connected to prophecy. Prophecy is not the knowledge of new things, it is not the way in which God mysteriously gives us new information, but a:

Deeper, more personal, more immediate penetration into the Christian life you are already living, so that the work of the Holy Spirit is inseparably bound up with the transformation of human life in the Body of Christ.⁸

Prophecy takes us deeper where we are, it breaks open the surface and it sets the present against God's future, which is already present to us in the fullness of Christ. The Spirit is eschatological. The Spirit of prophecy is discernment about the movement of things here and now and their potential or failure to move God-wards. It is thus the ground of Christian social and political engagement and discernment. This again coheres with the understanding of the Spirit as agent, for what Bulgakov is stressing is that the political and social discernment which the Spirit gives is not a power to produce results in the world, but 'rather the activation of a personal vision and witness which enables and empowers the discerning and critical involvement of the Christian in the world'.⁹ The emphasis on the personal nature of the Spirit is reflected for Bulgakov in the understanding of the nature of human spirit. He suggests that what it is for us to be spirit is to say that a self is constituted by three modes of being. Firstly, there is an awareness in us (no matter how primitive) of being a self, as being the source of initiative. Secondly, there is an awareness of our nature; we have a

⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

sense of what kind of being we are, someone who is located here and now and not just a cry in the dark. Thirdly, there is the life in which awareness shows itself. For us to be spirit is for us to be aware of ourselves as agents, as ‘having a particular kind of life, and actually living that life’.¹⁰ In the interplay and relation of these dimensions is the reality of my spiritual life. Bulgakov, Williams suggests, sees an analogy with the Trinitarian life of God. In God there is an awareness of being an agent, there is the awareness of the structure of life that is divine and there is the manifestation and activation of that life. Here the person of the Holy Spirit is understood in terms of the self-communication of God.

At the heart of Bulgakov’s Trinitarian understanding is kenosis, self-emptying. The Father gives all He is to the Son, and the eternally begotten Son gives all He is to the Father. Nothing is held back, and Williams notes that Bulgakov uses the extraordinary term ‘self-devastation’ in interpreting that movement. However, to leave the divine life here would be to leave God in negativity, a kind of mutual cancelling out of Father and Son. The Spirit is the manifestation and communication of the relation of Father and Son, ‘*this* is how God lives’.¹¹ Thus Pneuma points to the mutuality of the life of God. It makes it a giving out, not simply exchange. This is to suggest, to evoke, the speaking of the eternal Trinitarian love, not as an unqualified outpouring of the other that ends in mutual cancellation, but rather that ‘somehow, the self-emptying of the love of Father and Son for each other always “overflows” into another agency or personal mode of active love’.¹² The mutual self-giving of God’s life is, therefore, not cancellation, but active joy.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 23.

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

Williams also finds resonance in Bulgakov's suggestion that the Father and the Son are 'silent' before each other for so utter is their self-giving love toward and for each other 'that they have nothing to say to each other'.¹³ It is only in the Spirit that they 'speak', the Spirit thus articulates their life; 'the silent totality of mutual giving that is the source of everything'.¹⁴ The Spirit, however, never speaks for himself, but is the speaking of Father and Son as mutual gift, and that as Williams notes is what Bulgakov calls the *kenosis* of the Spirit, who never speaks *as* Spirit. Rather, we are taken into the mutuality of Father and Son, where in our own self-emptying and silence we encounter life and fullness. Again, for Williams this brings substance to what we might mean by the word spirituality. As we live and inhabit our way into the silence of the Spirit in prayer, so the 'mutual silence' of the self-emptying of Father and Son comes alive in us. Bulgakov sees the life of the Spirit at work in the whole of creation, preparing the way and breaking open the surface for the sacrificial love of Father and Son. It may be, as Williams notes, that the Spirit is perceived as personal only in Christ and his Church, because we understand its Trinitarian relation to Father and Son, yet nevertheless:

The Spirit is at work in the life of the unbeliever because the Spirit is the ground of every kind of openness to the world and to the saving presence of God the Father and the Word. And since none of us is able to live in the world without some openness to what there is, the Spirit is somehow at work in every moment, every human experience where we engage selflessly with our environment.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

This may be a summary of Bulgakov's thought, but as we shall see it has had a key influence on William's own pneumatology. It also provides food for his ecclesiology. For as each person of the Trinity lives kenotically, in an eternal self-emptying which brings life to the other, so the Church is that community in which its members hear their 'yes', not from the depths of their own being, but from the other. Human beings are not just made in the image of God, but recreated in the image of Christ, which means a genuinely corporate humanity discovered and expressed in the *Ekklesia*. As Williams is apt to say, the Church is God's great experiment with humanity. Given the rather chequered history of the Church as well as its current state, one might be tempted to suggest the experiment has failed. Williams (certainly as Archbishop of Canterbury) is only too well aware of the ambiguity of ecclesial life. However, he also picks up on what he sees as a 'remarkable insight'¹⁶ of Bulgakov. This is the recognition that within the actual lived out experience of the Church 'the eschatological presence of the Spirit in communion coexists with the extremely uneven levels of holiness, freedom and common sense that exist in actual human affairs'.¹⁷ This is related to the kenosis of the Holy Spirit: his presence and work continues patiently in self-emptying and 'self-forgetting', working with and alongside human fallibility and not over-ruling it. The Holy Spirit works with human nature and not against it. For it to be otherwise would for it to be working outside of history and would be a form of coercion.

If what Christ establishes and indeed constitutes is his Body on earth, the Church, then what is given by the Holy Spirit is, for Lossky, the third of Williams' Orthodox interlocutors, a middle way. On either side of that *via media* is collectivism and

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

individualism. Neither a top-down ecclesiology nor an atomised anthropology is acceptable. The meaning of *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling of the Trinity, means for us that I have no life that is not also yours. Each become themselves in relation, in communion, which by its nature cannot be established from the individual up, nor by fiat from above. For Lossky, and for Williams, this also means an engagement with *tradition*. What is encountered in the Church is not an impersonal deposit from the past (though of course there is a tendency for it to become as such.) Rather tradition is ‘whatever it is that opens up our life from narrow individuality to life in communion’.¹⁸ Lossky’s suggestion that tradition is the critical memory of the Church made alive by the Holy Spirit is one that resonates with Williams’.¹⁹ Here tradition means the whole environment of the Church: sacramental, scriptural, prayerful, pastoral, mission-orientated, all of which is *given* to us, yet with which we face the future and the yet-to-be-discovered. Tradition is about listening and learning, as Lossky says (and Williams agrees), to hear the ‘silences of Jesus’.²⁰ Williams interprets this as meaning that the truths spoken to us by the Word-made-flesh are never spoken by words alone, they have a *margin of silence*. There is always something more than stories, doctrines, ideas or texts which tradition gives. What makes it alive is the face of the Holy Spirit, which itself cannot be seen but is encountered in the faces of those who have uniquely realised their Christ-likeness. We become like Christ in only the way each of us can be. However, that uniqueness is formed always in relation, *together*.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

Eastern Orthodoxy underlines then for Williams, the critical role and nature of the work and Person of the Holy Spirit. We shall now retrace our steps in building up a picture of that work and dig deeper into the thought of Williams himself.

Getting the Question Right

There is perhaps a more existential reason why there has been a contemporary uneasiness with pneumatology. Its origins, Williams suggests, is to be found in the dark character of the twentieth century. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Vietnam all cry out for a theology of the *humanum*; what does it mean to be a human being created by God in the face of such depravity? The obvious resource upon which Christian faith calls is the life and death and Jesus of Nazareth. Only a crucified God can respond to such terror, even if that response is the silence and terror of the cross. As such the Spirit falls into the background and becomes a kind of supplementary text to the main Christological narrative and so often, in so far as it does become more pronounced, it becomes a way of either avoiding the tormenting questions of our age by simply evading them, or overriding them with an artificial triumphalism. Given the nature of the *primal wound* of Jesus Christ we should not be surprised if Williams finds both tendencies inadequate and indeed a betrayal of the gospel; pneumatology cannot be a secondary comforting gloss on Christian anthropology.

In *Word and Spirit*,²¹ Williams suggests that contemporary theologies of the Spirit still carry the echoes of the predominance of one kind of Trinitarian model of the early centuries of Christian doctrinal formulation. That model is, however, both then and now, constantly being challenged by a more penetrating though elusive alternative. That alternative is in fact what is actually presupposed in much of the

²¹ Rowan Williams, 'Word and Spirit' in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 107-127.

Biblical witness and much Christian liturgical language and practice, but is far more difficult to par down in theory. At the heart of the difficulty lies the endemic problem which runs through the whole of the history of Christian theology. This problem, as Williams sees it, is essentially the drawing upon the scriptural and liturgical witness and practice of the Church, which offers a three-fold narrative of God's life and relation to the world, but which is then moulded to fit an essentially two-fold cosmological structure: God and the world. As such, both Christology and pneumatology very easily fall into 'bridge-concepts' in which the traffic flows in one direction – from God to the world. The mediator thus occupies a 'space' between that which it bridges. The relationship it has with God becomes unclear (given the direction of the 'traffic'). Furthermore, it raises the rather awkward question of why two mediators are required, and why, once more than one is acknowledged, the number should be restricted to two. To begin with 'God' and the 'world' is to begin in the wrong place with the wrong question.

This is borne out for Williams in the confusion found in many second century writers. Their temptation was, he suggests, one of assimilating *Logos* to *Pneuma* or vice versa. In *Word and Spirit*²² he highlights something of the inadequacy of theologians of the period, whilst at the same time recognising the slow movement toward a more coherent pneumatology. Hermas is an example of the reduction of Word to Spirit, in whose writings the pre-existent Spirit chooses to dwell in flesh, which is then taken up into God as Son, becoming a 'fellow-councillor'. Justin on the other hand moves in the opposite direction, notoriously offering an image in which the Spirit is almost an incidental afterthought as an object of worship after Father, Son *and angels*. What

²² What follows is a paraphrase of William's précis of second century discourse.

then is the Spirit in himself? As Williams notes, it seems for Justin the answer is ‘between the Word and the Universe’.²³

Williams detects a helpful move in the writings of Hippolytus, who is straining toward a language in which the Spirit is that which brings harmony to Father and Son, so that call and response flow into unity. But again, Williams suggests there is still an imbalance, an asymmetrical Trinity that ‘consists of the persons and *oikonomia*, a “dispensation” of grace and “symphonic accord”, which is Spirit’.²⁴ Iraneaus famously puts forward the metaphor of Son and Spirit as the *two hands* of God in creation and which unite to carry out the work of God in the world. But again, Williams is uneasy with the rather flabby images used, which do not find an easy place within a more developed Trinitarian theology. However, he also sees in Iranaeus a helpful Pauline resonance, in which it is only the Spirit that cries ‘Abba’ and it is in the Spirit of adoption as sons and daughters that we can grow in the divine likeness. As we shall see, Williams has far more sympathy with a Pauline (and Johannine) understanding of the Spirit as opposed to a Lucan one.

In contemporary theology, Williams recognises the same tendencies at work. In the theology of Geoffrey Lampe (*God as Spirit*, 1977) there is a conviction that Spirit is a term which is appropriate for *all* the ways in which God is understood to communicate Gods-self, so that ‘the pre-existent’ and eternal Christ is in no sense an independent hypostasis, but only a strongly hypostatized metaphor for Spirit’.²⁵ As in Hermas, Logos it would seem is absorbed into Pneuma. The Spirit is the bridge from God to us, and Jesus *is* the Christ because of his transparency to the Spirit.

²³ Williams, *Word and Spirit*, p. 111.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

At the other end of the spectrum Williams detects in Barth a move, which at least partially, reduces Spirit to Word. As we have noted earlier, Barth has as his determining hermeneutic the sovereignty of God who enables us to receive the Word which we cannot in our own right receive. The Spirit is the subjective side of this objective revelation and it is one that enables us to be the adoptive children of God. Yet, Williams suggests, because the discussion emerges out of the problem of revelation Barthian pneumatology is mostly couched in terms of Spirit as that which enables there to be a human ground for hearing the Word, so that ‘strictly speaking, the “subjective possibility of revelation” is not the Spirit as such, but the Spirit in making the Word present’.²⁶ For Williams, this establishes the work of the Spirit as witness certainly, but leaves rather ambiguous Christian praxis. If the Spirit is nothing but the ‘seal of epistemological security’ that acts as the mode of reception and guarantor of what Christ does then a chasm begins to form between the life of the Spirit and the life of the Church, in other words Spirit and spirituality. For the Spirit that is received at baptism is that which not only instructs but *transforms*. For Williams pneumatology is the constitutive reality of Christian existence, which involves *historicity*, which is to say in the contingent experience of a Church that exists in and faces the ambiguities of change.

The impasse in recognising this is formed, for the Bishop, in a too heavily accented Lucan model of pneumatology. In Luke/Acts, the Spirit is seen as the chronological continuation of the work of Christ, filling a ‘space’ left behind by the Ascension. The Spirit is thus the latest bridge between God and the world, substituting for Christ. The Lucan confirmation of the activity of the Spirit is, as Williams sees it, found in

²⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

‘extraordinary experiences’.²⁷ Pauline theology on the other hand, whilst retaining a firmly eschatological view of the Spirit, sees its activity in the transformation of human relating. The emphasis is on our life *in* the Spirit and is certainly not restricted to that which is episodic (the linear continuity of God’s revelation), nor that which is extraordinary (glossolalia etc). The central Pauline reality is our identification, by grace, with the obedience of the Son to the Father, which gives us the status of adopted children. The Spirit in John may seem at first glance to reflect the Lucan model of substitution and continuation, but Williams sees also that the Johannine Spirit is not reducible to either, nor does it simply act upon the disciples but, again, in and *with* them. In John, the work of the Spirit is never extraordinary; it is linked to the forgiveness of sins and it is the Spirit of Truth that ‘re-presents the judging and convicting truth of Christ’s own presence’.²⁸

Williams thus sees a far greater parallel between Paul and John, than either has with Luke. Unlike the latter, the former associate the Spirit with response and conformation to the Son:

The Spirit’s witness is not a pointing to the Son outside of the human world; it is the continuing state of sharing the mutuality of the Father and the Son; it is forgiven or justified life. It is also the assurance of the fact that mediation between God and the human is done away; the veil is lifted, truth stands in the midst of us. The distance between God and the world is transcended...²⁹

²⁷ Williams, ‘Word and Spirit’, p. 118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁹ Williams, ‘Word and Spirit’, p. 120.

The ‘problem’ of the Spirit is not, therefore, one of accounting for how God can and continues to bridge the gap between God’s-self and the world. The difficulty of articulating a truly Trinitarian pneumatology is the learning to recognise that the Spirit is the principle of unity between Father and Son, and is the re-creation *in us* of that relation:

The Jesus who, as risen and exalted, is at the Father’s right hand becomes the one who sends the Spirit into the heart of believers; the Spirit in turn enacts in us the union of Jesus with the Father.³⁰

The Spirit has his own distinct share in the work of salvation, which cannot be reduced to that of the Father and the Son. That work is more than an epistemological safeguard for the continuing work of Christ, or as that which makes it possible for sinful humanity to be able to receive the word of God. The work of the Spirit is in fact to overcome the false question stated at the beginning of this chapter in which theology sought to find mediatorial concepts to overcome the gap between the transcendent God, who is elsewhere, and the world *here*. What Williams pushes us to see is that it is our idolatrous imagery of ‘God’ that needs to be dismantled by this Trinitarian life. The Spirit of adoption is one that allows us to cry ‘Abba’ with the Son. It articulates the human confession of utter dependence upon the saving work of Christ, and though Jesus made that cry only once, in Gethsemane, it is a cry which sums up the inseparable nature of the life of the Son from conflict, choice, and suffering; from the cross. It is because of the intimacy of Jesus with the one he calls Father that he is propelled toward Calvary and it cannot be otherwise. The previous chapter essentially pointed us to the way in which Williams sees the ‘transcendent’ nature of Christ as being found in a life determined and animated by the divine will

³⁰ Williams, ‘Word and Spirit’, p. 120.

and not the agenda of the world. Jesus' refusal to engage the world on the world's terms leads relentlessly to impotence and suffering. For the Father to rescue Jesus from outside, *which is essentially to say from beyond history*, would only share in the world's agenda of coercion and force. In other words Father and Son are not to be put in opposition to each other on the cross. The silence of the Father is His sharing in the powerlessness of the Son in a dark and corrupt world:

Father and Son are not to be set against each other at Calvary: the God who 'abandons' is the God of Caiaphas, the God whose relation to the world is that of master to slave. But Jesus is not slave but child, and eldest child, and adult 'child', and his Father is not the castrating despot of infantile nightmare. 'God' vanishes on the cross: Father and Son remain, in the shared, consubstantial weakness of their compassion. And the Father will raise the Son in the power of the Spirit.³¹

The adoptive nature of Christian identity is to be understood only in the light of the cross, which means not only recognising and sharing in the kenosis of the Son, but 'to accept what might be called the poverty of the Father'.³² The God whom Freud diagnoses as the all-powerful Father figure who intervenes from 'beyond' is indeed a projection and fantasy. If Christ has removed the veil then such an all-compensating Father-figure is revealed for what he is; an illusion. To look upon the true God is to look upon the Father and the Son whose glory is revealed for us in suffering, death and resurrection. Power is manifestly absent, and we are reminded of the inappropriateness of that word in the God who creates *ex nihilo*. The world which God creates is a real world, albeit one that is fundamentally dependent upon its

³¹ Ibid., p. 121.

³² Ibid., p. 122.

creator for its being, but one whose life is authentic, and its own. The absence of God's manifest power is, for Williams, a decision for powerlessness and 'against the domination of the world by manipulation or fantasy'³³ (from outside of history). It is a decision not to escape, but it occurs in history not as a disguised attempt to manipulate; it seeks only response (again, we discern the resonance with creation *ex nihilo* as call-response).

The work of the Spirit is not to be understood as being essentially epistemological, neither in the strong sense of that which makes it possible to hear God's Word subjectively, nor in the weaker sense of adding to the teaching of Christ: 'it is rather a completion in terms of liberation and transformation; it is *gift*, renewal and life'.³⁴ Thus, we begin to see both the difficulty and the crucial nature of pneumatology. Spirit is fundamental to Christian anthropology; it is the human identity of the Christian. In his short publication *What is Christianity?*³⁵ Williams goes as far as to suggest:

Probably, the most important Christian belief is that we are given the right to speak to God in exactly the same way that Jesus did, because the life, the power, the Spirit that filled Jesus is given also to us.³⁶

The Church's language and imagery about the Holy Spirit is what is meant by Williams by the term spirituality, which takes us into the heart and indeed the relation between chapter two and three, between the Father and the Son. It takes us to the intimacy, the union of the first and second terms of the Trinitarian existence and constitutes the third distinct term whose divinity rests upon the work of the Spirit in

³³ Ibid., p. 122.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁵ Rowan Williams, *What is Christianity?* (London: SPCK, 2015).

³⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

our salvation as that which constitutes our divinisation (see below). That is why second century attempts to interpret the Spirit in a mediatorial role simply will not do, for quite the opposite is the case; the Spirit, as Williams insists, is bound up with the loss of such concepts. As such the life and work of the Spirit cannot be abstracted from the Christian form of life *as life*, which is to say, spirituality. To attempt to identify the distinctive quality or work of the Spirit is, for Williams, pretty much a doomed enterprise, producing ‘only the most sterile abstraction’.³⁷ His sympathy lies with the Eastern Orthodox view that the ‘face’ of the Spirit is not there for us to see. There is in William’s pneumatology a kind of surplus of meaning:

If what we are speaking of is the agency which draws us to the Father by constituting us children, we are evidently speaking of an agency not simply identical with ‘Father’ or ‘Son’, or with a sum or amalgam of the two.³⁸

There is, to put it differently, a surplus to our grammar of God that goes beyond talk of source and ground, of beginning and end. There is that which is not proper to God as a disturbing presence crying out as an infant in a manger and a dying adult from a cross. There is that, in our talk about God, which infuses the present with the future, ‘between reality as it is and the truth which encompasses it; between Good Friday and Easter’.³⁹ It is that grammar of God which enables us to live in the world without illusion or despair, but which confronts the reality of a godless world by being held in the kenotic and self-giving love of Father and Son. The life of the Spirit is, for Williams, a life which finds its security in the powerlessness of the cross. One might say that for Williams the Spirit is that which enables us to keep awake in Gethsemane.

³⁷ Williams, ‘Word and Spirit’, p. 123.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

In *Word and Spirit*, Williams shifts the emphasis of the Church as the ‘Spirit-filled community’ to recovering it as a *sign* of the Spirit, ‘rather than its domicile’.⁴⁰ It is not an either/or move, but a both/and shift. His intention is to articulate an understanding of the *Ekklesia* as that which signifies, points to, ‘the humanity *that could be*’⁴¹ (my italics). The Spirit here is seen as that which brings about, is the pressure toward something that is not yet the case; there is always more. His sacramental theology consequently places emphasis on change and growth and movement. Sacraments are not just epiphanies of the sacred. They rather trace a ‘transition from one sort of reality to another’.⁴² Baptism and Eucharist name and interpret movement, *change*, in human life as being in Christ and towards the Father. Here the Spirit may be named, though remains unseen: ‘Spirit is active where broken flesh and shed blood become the sign and promise of human wholeness and union with the Father’.⁴³ Thus we are brought back to the beginning of this section in which the anxieties of the twentieth century demanded a theology of the *humanun*. The life and work of the Spirit for Williams takes us away from an unquestioning and uncriticised theism with its Freudian projections and takes us deeper *into* the world where we can learn to live in the tension between security, powerlessness and what is to come. Something has been given to us in Jesus that has changed everything for all time. Yet the nature of that which is given is not final, but opens us up to the future, to what might be. As Williams says in his prologue to *On Christian Theology*, ‘the theologian is always beginning in the middle’.⁴⁴ Not just the theologian but the Church itself. There is a common life and practice, a *tradition* already there but which

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 124.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 124.

⁴² Sacraments of the New Society, *OCT* p. 209.

⁴³ Williams, ‘Word and Spirit’, p. 124.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. xii.

in its continuous encounter with a changing world is itself changing and rediscovering itself:

The Son is manifest in a single, paradigmatic figure; the Spirit is manifest in the 'translatability' of that into the contingent diversity of history. Freedom in the Spirit is uncircumscribed, and yet it always has the shape of Jesus the Son [...]. It is the Spirit who leads us to 'Godlessness' in order to bring out of us the cry of 'Abba', who emancipates us from God to bring us to the Trinity.⁴⁵

The Holy Spirit then is not a bridge connecting God to the world, which needed to be constructed after the Ascension of Christ. The Spirit is that which brings us into encounter with and participation in the relation of Father and Son. The Spirit is never anything other than the Spirit of Jesus Christ and yet its 'work, presence and transforming power is not simply confined to those who profess name of Jesus Christ'.⁴⁶ The Spirit is neither the possession of the Christian Church, nor a generalised divine transcendence.

It is, however, the condition of the existence of the Church; it is that which makes the *Ekklesia* personal; one might say the making of human beings into persons whose identity comes as gift from the other. This means the Church, 'God's great experiment with humanity,' is neither individualist, nor collectivist, but rather the Spirit is what constitutes the distinctive liberty of those persons with and for each other in Christ. As such it is 'the pledge and foretaste of where our humanity is going by the grace of God [...] and is the ground of creativity, of newness'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 125-6.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Margin of Silence*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

As we shall go on to see, for Williams the purpose of interfaith encounter and understanding is the drawing of people into this newness.

The Spirit and the Trinity

The mystery of the Trinity is the ultimate foundation for pluralism. Rowan Williams in his paper *Trinity and Pluralism*⁴⁸ explores this claim made by Raimundo Pannikar, who acts as his key interlocutor in the discussion. Williams is deeply impressed and sympathetic to Pannikar's thought, though as we shall see not without criticism. For Pannikar (claims Williams), the Trinitarian structure is that of eternally generative 'source', from which arises 'form'. Form is that which can be seen and engaged with, it is the ground of all intelligibility. However, that form and that intelligibility does not and cannot come to a terminus, nor is it ever limited by any particular expression. Form is constantly being realised in the kaleidoscopic nature of active life and that life equally springs forth out of the eternally generating source. Source does not exhaust itself in the generation of structure and intelligibility but also produces that which dissolves and re-forms structure and determination. As such, form is never absolutised, 'but always turned back towards the primal reality of its source'.⁴⁹

Source is, of course, that which we speak of God as creator and author. Form is Logos and life Pneuma. There is no substantive difference between source and form, for they are not things, but 'two moments *in* one unbroken act'.⁵⁰ Such movement is not static, there is no point in which this act is complete, but rather the 'act' is one that animates a world of change.

⁴⁸ 'Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', in *OCT*, pp 167- 180

⁴⁹ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 167.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

As Williams notes what is particularly important in this scheme is the relationship between the second and third terms. Logos does not reduce Being to itself, 'the reality of existence is not to be defined as what intelligence can master by grasping structures'.⁵¹ As such Logos does not exhaust being, or as Pannikar himself puts it, *Being does not need to be reduced to consciousness*. Being tells us what consciousness is, 'But the *is* of Being is free'.⁵² We shall have more to say about this rather dense summary in the next chapter.

Williams sees, however, this Trinitarian relation reflected in the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul and John. What those theologians strove to articulate was a vision of the *Ekklesia* as the Body of Christ and not just another society, but rather the creation of a new humanity. Each member of that Body is connected to the other through their response to Jesus as Lord and with each other. Both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' relations are essential. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus constituting the unifying point, but also that which enables, *authorises*, a community which through the inter-dependence and mutuality of its members grows into a Christ-shaped future. As such, *other* people are indispensable for this divine initiative; the presence of Christ is lived out in the kaleidoscopic ensemble of Christian lives that are drawn into this future. This is more than a society of friends who share something in common, namely belief about Jesus of Nazareth, which needs to be announced to those on the 'outside'. The *Ekklesia* exists first and foremost because the Logos-made-flesh in the person of Jesus is a life of true and full liberty before the Father and is one that begins very quickly to be recognised as having the potential to bring the whole of the world into a new kind of liberty and intelligibility.

⁵¹ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 168.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

This potential, is eschatological, it is always historically incomplete. Its intelligibility and unity cannot be reduced and simply grasped at any concrete moment in time or as an idea. Rather, it is revealed as human lives are touched and transformed in history through an endless variety of imitations of Christ. This for Williams is where we recognise, where we speak of the Spirit, which is:

The same divine action as establishes the form of the incarnate Logos, but working now to realise that form in a diversity as wide as the diversity of the human race itself. Thus, in theological terms, human history is the story of the discovery or realisation of Jesus Christ in the faces of all men and women. The fullness of Christ is always to be discovered, never there already in a conceptual pattern that explains and predicts everything; it is the fullness of Christ that is to be discovered, a unity that holds together around this one story.⁵³

The never complete collage of human lives and diversity which the Body of Christ is, is, for Williams, what Pannikar assumes in his distinction between Logos and Pneuma. That Being does not need to be reduced to consciousness, he suggests, is found less abstractly in the unforeseeable and unpredictable human response to the risen Christ. As such, the relation between Word and Spirit is still being realised in human history so that 'we cannot ever, while history lasts, say precisely all that is to be said about Logos'.⁵⁴ What, for Williams, our speaking of the Holy Trinity means comes more clearly into intelligibility. God as source and author is categorically *other*, and we are simply unable to imagine him. Yet the historical form of the Logos in the person of Jesus gives a face to the divine but does not exhaust it. The Spirit is

⁵³ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

that which resists us from turning Christ into a fixed form and something that is essentially in the past and with it the *Ekklesia* as simply facing that past. The Spirit opens up the future and through it ‘we must be taught to find God in the present tension between tradition and unforeseen possibilities’.⁵⁵ The pattern of the Trinitarian life is one that might be thought of as eternal movement and as such is the corrective in the life of the *Ekklesia* that stops it from freezing our description of God into a manageable object.

This sense of Trinitarian ‘movement’ is more comprehensively explored by Williams in his essay, ‘*The deflections of desire, negative theology in Trinitarian disclosure*’.⁵⁶ Here his main interlocutor is St John of the Cross, whose writings offer a resource to overcome the temptation of perceiving the apophatic nature of the being of God as residing somewhere beyond the Trinitarian relation. During the fourth and fifth centuries, Christian theology gradually but resolutely moved divine relatedness away from a descending scale of participation to the personal nature of Word and Source. Yet lurking behind this transition was a perception which understood the divine essence as *something* which made God *God* over and above Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not only did this make the Trinitarian relation secondary, it also made it more comprehensible and manageable (this is the ‘bit’ we understand), than the mystery that stood behind the Persons. Thus the God we ‘know’ offers the relatively straightforward understanding that we are incorporated into the Word’s eternal relation to its Source. Williams employs St John’s poetry and theology to destabilise

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 179.

⁵⁶ Rowan Williams, ‘The deflections of desire, negative theology in Trinitarian disclosure’, in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

this understanding by John's use of 'erotic' and 'desiring' imagery within the Trinitarian relations. Here apophatic theology is more than a conceptual strategy underlying our grammatical inability to define God, for it is rather 'anchored in the reality of personal *kenosis*, divine and human'.⁵⁷

Running through St John's works is an account of the Trinitarian relations understood as eternal desire, as *eros*. The filial relation of Father and Son is at the same time a nuptial relation in which each is 'in' the other, as lover and beloved, and the love uniting them is equal to them. That love is an 'excess' of what each desires in the Other and so is itself an agent of the divine life. The love of the Father and Son must open itself out to a further otherness and not simply come to rest in a love which returns upon itself, but rather:

The love of the Son for the Father is itself a desire for the desire of the Father and so for the Father's excess of love 'beyond' what is directed to the Son.⁵⁸

There is a *deflection* of the Son's desire toward the Father, which makes that love more than a movement toward a terminus, a finality. It is the Spirit as excess of divine love 'that secures the character of God-as-such'.⁵⁹ The being of God is thus identified not with a mystery beyond the Trinitarian relation, but with the movement of excess, of desire, of Father and Son, in the indwelling itself.

To put that anthropomorphically, this for Williams reconstitutes our own desiring and our own *eros*, and so destabilises our own need to seek a finalised 'Other' who will complete who and what I am. That seeking for finality is in fact a projection onto the other of our needs and gratification; the self bound to *eros* terminating in the Other as

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

object. The work of the Spirit, our spirituality, is the transformation of the Self, so that in Augustinian terms, memory, intelligence and will become faith, hope and love. God is that in which these virtues find their fulfilment and *telos*, but God is not a determinate object for our *eros* to possess. As we are stripped of our delusional need for gratification to ‘complete’ ourselves, so there begins the painful dissolution of that false selfhood, or as St John so vividly describes, the dark night of the soul. This is of course Christological, and we are to remember that it is the Spirit in us that allows us to cry out Abba to the Father. Thus we are brought to Gethsemane and to the Passion of Christ in which Jesus is left without any obvious sense of consolation from the one he cries out to; ‘the Father, we might say, has ceased to be in any way a graspable other for the subjectivity of Jesus’.⁶⁰ In the dereliction of the cross Jesus loves the excess of the Father’s love, which is to say that which is more than a mirror of his own identity:

The Son’s love must enact the Father’s, not simply reflect it back to him; so on Calvary it acts in an experienced darkness with respect to the knowledge or feeling of a divine other.⁶¹

Here negativity, the apophatic is encountered not in that which lies beyond the relations of the Trinity but in the relation of the hypostases themselves who are in no way ‘objects’ to each other or any way that reflects human interpersonal relations. We have no pattern or categories that would enable us to grasp the ‘subjectivity’ of the Persons, which simply is alien to our standard discourse of subject-object, sameness and otherness. For:

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 122.

What escapes conceptual description is not the interiority of the divine essence but the movement of 'love beyond desire', which we can only make sense of (insofar as we can make sense of it at all) in the context of the unconsolated commitment and objectless longing of contemplation.⁶²

There is an eternal self-bestowal in the Trinitarian life, an excess of love which never stands still and finds a terminus in the other; a pattern of divine life shown to us in the narrative of Jesus 'and made available to us in the common life of the Spirit-filled community'.⁶³ There is always a 'more-than', always an excess that goes beyond our temptation to finalise and complete - an excess that is to be constantly discovered beyond the frontiers of the Church and, as we now shall go on to see, certainly beyond that system known as Christianity.

⁶² Ibid., p. 122.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 135.

Chapter 5: Beyond the One and the Many

A fox or a hedgehog? The many or the one? So I began this thesis and it has been its recurring theme. It isn't of course new; Plato discussed it in some detail in *The Republic*. It has found echoes throughout the history of philosophy and theology, but for Christians there is a very sharp edge to the question. The problem, as Rowan Williams understands all too well, is how can it be that all things find their unity and judgement in a few contingent events that occurred some two thousand years ago? In Chapter one, we outlined the contours of three standard responses to that tension: exclusivists who affirm the one over and against the many, pluralists who, in various ways, absorb the one into the many and inclusivists who see their one in the many. Williams finds all three responses inadequate and argues, as we shall now go on to see, that there is neither one nor many, but that reality is enfolded in the Christian understanding of the Trinitarian life of God, offering both unity and plurality.

In this final chapter, I will retrace my steps and draw out from the foundational commitments, described in Chapters two to four, the implications for the standard typologies, described in Chapter one. That will enable us to see with greater clarity why Williams is so dismissive of this paradigm in his paper, 'The Finality of Christ'. I shall then articulate what Williams offers as an alternative, which is a robust Trinitarianism, as found in his engagement with the thought of Pannikar. For Williams is, I would claim, a Trinitarian pluralist, by which I do not mean that Williams believes in two distinct things, the Trinity *and* pluralism, but rather that the nature of the plurality which *is* the world is Trinitarian in its structure. This is not an approach exclusive to Williams, but is one to which he brings his own distinctive emphases and nuances as established in his foundational commitments. I shall then

explore two particular inter-faith encounters, when Williams addressed Islamic audiences in Cairo and Islamabad, in which the various themes of this thesis can be seen. Finally I shall offer what I believe to be the logical implications of that which is implicit in Williams' thought in making some kind of sense of the universal nature of God's saving activity.

Revelation, Christology and Pneumatology Re-visited

In Chapter two, we established that the understanding of revelation in the thought of Rowan Williams is, one might say, rather unglamorous. It locates the movement of revelation in history from which there is no escaping debate, conflict, change, paradox and of course contingency. There is only this reality, and it is here or nowhere that our speaking about God and God's speaking to us is to be discovered. It will be remembered that the radical nature of *creation ex nihilo*, as presented by Williams, offered a very careful grammar of God that resisted drawing God into the universe as yet another thing. In Williams' hands, this doctrine is notably lacking in any language of power, which in effect is a refusal to see God and creation occupying the same space and so in competition with each other. As such Williams immediately moves away from the trajectory to which the thought of Paul Knitter takes us. It will be remembered that Knitter, in order to avoid what he saw as the pitfalls of dualism, God *and* the world, articulated an understanding of creation as an 'eternal co-inhering and dynamic interaction between God and creation'.¹ This relationship is one of love; because God is love, he cannot do anything but create, and 'there was never a time when God was not pouring out God's self in creation'.² Knitter claims that only a God who is *indwelling* in creation can offer the world of religious language a basis for both

¹ D'Costa and others, *Only One Way?* p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

inter-faith relations and the ground for the liberation of the poor. *Creation ex nihilo*, for Knitter, is part of the problem for it essentially portrays God as being ‘out there.’ The apparent distance between God and creation that Knitter is so fearful of, Williams is clear, is best resolved by a radical understanding of the very doctrine Knitter rejects. *Creation ex nihilo* is not an imposition of any kind from an external source or power over and against the world. There are not two realities in a competing relationship with each other. God alone is ‘supremely free of the world,’³ the difference which God is, is beyond difference, if that ‘difference’ refers to a *relationship* between two or more things. As such God alone does not need to negotiate an identity in the world, for God to be God-self is so without the processes of struggle. God is without need of any kind; creation is sheer gift and unnecessary, it does not, as Knitter suggests, assist God in being God. God’s radical transcendence is the very nature of his ‘immanence’, for only that which is so totality other does not exclude anything else, i.e. stands in some kind of relative distance from it. That creation is not needed in any way by God is wholly in accord with God as Trinity, ‘intrinsic self-love and self-gift’,⁴ and so as ‘being-for-another.’⁵ As Williams states:

God creates ‘in God’s interest’ (there could be no other motive for divine action); but that ‘interest’ is not the building-up of the divine life, which simply is what it is, but its giving away. For God to act for God’s sake *is* for God to act for our sake.⁶

³ Williams, ‘On Being Creatures’, p. 72.

⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

Creation ex nihilo, for Williams, establishes the absolute dependence of creation upon the creator and the autonomy of the creation to be itself (not God). For him, only a God who is and remains free from the world can be God. As such, our language of revelation must resist the lure of the divine acting as an agent imposing itself either from ‘above’ or ‘below’.

Revelation from above would be a kind of violence in which history becomes the stage upon which God is heard to shout. It may seem to offer a clear and powerful narrative which by its nature relativises all others, yet it fails to understand the processes of its own production and consequently the particular cultural and historical ‘pressures’ which forged that narrative. Though clearly an admirer of Karl Barth, and whilst recognising that he strains to prohibit the revealed Word becoming a human possession, Williams nevertheless sees Barth as de-historicising the revelatory event by isolating it from the ambiguities of history so that

Revelation interrupts the uncertainties of history with a summons to absolute knowledge, God’s knowledge of and interpretation of himself.⁷

The de-historicising that Williams detects in Barth, is I would suggest, even more explicit in Daniel Strange. It is one thing for Strange to speak from a tradition-specific point, recognising that all language is so embodied. His unveiling of a ‘Kantian master-code’ behind modernity’s universals (a point he learned as a student at the feet of Gavin D’Costa)⁸ is a recognisable trait in contemporary theology.⁹ It is another thing to establish the nature of the authority for the veracity of that starting

⁷ Williams, ‘Trinity and Revelation’, p. 133.

⁸ D’Costa and others, *Only One Way?* p. 97.

⁹ See for example Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981).

point, which for Strange is undoubtedly the Bible.¹⁰ In order to do this Strange commits himself to an understanding of Scripture that is in effect free from history. God is ‘semantically present’¹¹ in the words of the Bible, so that ‘in philosophical terms, there is an ontological relationship between God and his words’.¹² These words are a ‘kind of extension of Him’.¹³ Thus, it frees revelation from the ambiguities of the historical. For Williams, Scripture is itself a set of texts that exhibit ‘learning about learning’, a constant re-reading of itself, with the implication that the New Testament is ‘less a set of theological conclusions than a set of generative models for how to do Christian thinking’.¹⁴

Revelation from below on the other hand may avoid a potentially totalitarian approach by perceiving revelation as existing universally, but at a subterranean level, deep below the movement of history above. As such it appears to be unaffected by culture and linguistics. Yet it too becomes separable from the ordinary events of human life, free from the dialectical processes of historical reflection. It may seem to offer a benevolent point of reference for all religious phenomena, but is itself a theology without a practice to support it, which again is to say that it exists a-historically, yet it sees all religious practices as expressing (conforming?) to its apparent universality. For Williams, there is no essence of religion that may, in principle, be tracked down, yet neither is he content to live with a friendly mutual toleration between religious traditions that involves an unquestioned co-existence. If anything, Rowan Williams is a theologian who asks difficult questions.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 100-102.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 101.

¹² Ibid., p. 101.

¹³ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, ‘The Unity of Christian Truth’ in *On Christian Theology* p.22

As such, Williams resists the absorption of the specific and radical starting point of Christianity into a Hick-like ‘general mythological pattern of divine embodiment’.¹⁵ Hick suggests that if the Christian message had have travelled as far East as it did West, then Christology would have been absorbed into an avatar pattern of understanding.¹⁶ For Williams the failure of this hypothesis again lies in it’s a-historical nature. It is precisely *because* of the particular context of Jesus of Nazareth that the story creates the kind of questions and responses that it did:

The ‘divinity’ of Jesus becomes a theological possibility and eventually a theological necessity because of his relation to the institutionalised religious meanings of Israel [...] and insofar as the background of Israel remained part of the story of Jesus, this story would generate its own myth and dogma, rather than simply being absorbed into another mythology.¹⁷

Williams is committed instead to what seems the rather unpromising starting point of human history, but it is his insistence that it is here, in our ‘learning about our learning,’ that offers both the greatest expression of God’s freedom and human possibility. To say that revelation is discovered in history is to recognise that originating event and interpretation create a never-ending spiral in which a community learns its truth, which calls for attention to how that truth is learned, hence the dove-tailing of two approaches. The first approach (following Ricoeur) recognises that revelation has to do with that which is generative, which breaks open the old with something new. Revelation emerges from a particular past experience producing ‘pressure,’ in the form of a questioning attention, to the present moment. The second

¹⁵ Williams, ‘Finality of Christ’, p. 103.

¹⁶ ‘Jesus and the World Religions’, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. by J. Hick (London: SCM, 1977), p. 176.

¹⁷ Williams, ‘Finality of Christ’, p. 103

approach discerns revelation in the manifestation of the way in which a people understand themselves *as a people* in relation to God. For Israel, to speak of relationship to YHWH is not to be making abstract claims about a divine being, but is to say that what constitutes Israel *as Israel* is what it means to talk about God. The question that such a view of revelation raises is for Williams, ‘If we live like this, has revelation occurred?’¹⁸ Transposed into how Williams perceives other religious traditions, we can begin to see more clearly why for him what is at stake are not competing answers to abstract questions, but the recognition (or not) of God in the faces of those turned toward him in and through the practices of other religious communities, or as he puts it:

Sometimes when we look at our neighbours of other traditions, it can be as if we see in their eyes a reflection of what we see; they do not have the words we have, but something is deeply recognisable.¹⁹

In Chapter three we explored the way in which Williams understands that the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is one who does not wish to be everything. In Jesus of Nazareth the eternal Word has become incarnate. Part of the struggle that the theology of the hypostatic union attempted to move beyond was that between the humanity and divinity of Christ as being in competition with each other, as battling for the same space and so echoing his understanding of *creation ex nihilo*. Jesus was fully human, subject like us all to change, to growth and to learning, yet was a life that was completely transparent and faithful to its source in the one he called Father. Language about transcendence (how is the difference which God *is*, encountered in Jesus?) is to be located not in an unearthly aspect of the life of Jesus, but in the perfect

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁹ Rowan Williams, ‘Christian Identity and Religious Plurality’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 58 (2006) p. 75.

performance of a human life animated by the divine in which he does not compete with the world, let alone on the world's terms. *Krisis* is thus generated at this particular moment in the life of Israel, as the particular religious systems of second Temple Judaism and its language not only fail to recognise this life as God's invitation, but as radically threatening to it. God is thus edged out of the world on to the cross (to borrow a phrase from Bonhoeffer). The resurrected Christ returns to those who had helped execute him, but does so as the judge who does not condemn. The *Ekklesia* is that community constituted by its Risen Lord, that knows itself to have been found guilty, yet forgiven, and so freed from the narratives of violence and self-reference which the world generates. As such *the primal wound* of Jesus, crucified and risen 'is what puts to us the question of how God can be if this is how he is historically?'²⁰ The *Ekklesia*, as the Body of Christ, incarnates this question and is perpetually refashioned by it through its scriptures, liturgy and encounter with an ever-changing world. As that *Ekklesia* looks upon the world of religious pluralism, its mission is to enable this question to be heard, yet knowing that it too continually comes under the judgment of that very question. Indeed, Williams goes as far as to say that:

Perhaps the church can be defined only in some such way as the bearer of that question; and conversely it might be said that whatever bears that question is, or is within, the church.²¹

That comment may have been written in 1979, yet its echo can be heard throughout the writings of Williams. As such it would be very surprising to discover Williams to be sympathetic to D'Costa's tradition-specific starting point of the Roman Catholic

²⁰ Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', in *OCT* p. 161 (my italics).

²¹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p. 12.

Church itself. Both as an Anglican and a theologian deeply influenced by eastern Orthodoxy, Williams would have reservations over Roman Catholic claims that the *Ekklesia* subsists in it (and only partially elsewhere). The question of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations is not one to be discussed here. We simply note that the Christology and subsequent ecclesiology of Williams is such that there is far less need or requirement to define the boundaries of Church in the way in which Roman Catholicism does. The cross of Jesus Christ, as we have constantly seen in the writing of Williams, is that which destabilises all religious language and does so because it is and remains profoundly disorientating, even more so than Barth believed:

The cross of Jesus Christ is stranger even than the Barthian might suggest: God's difference is beyond all the words and institutions in which it is (inevitably) articulated, and through which it may be turned into a means of control.²²

Thus the starting point for D'Costa's cautious 'inclusivism' is not one Williams shares. It is not that Williams has a 'low' view of the Church, on the contrary, the sacramental nature of the Body of Christ plays a central role in his ecclesiology. Yet what is given to the Church exists for the sake of the world. The Church, committed to its own questionability, is 'not free to claim finality for itself: there are things it does not say, meanings it does not carry'.²³ If Christ himself 'does not contain all systems of religious meaning'²⁴ then it becomes impossible for the (Roman Catholic) Church to be the final or definitive arbiter in setting the parameters of how the strangeness of the cross may reveal itself to us let alone to others.

²² Williams, 'Finality of Christ', p. 106.

²³ Ibid., p. 100.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

In Chapter four, we explored the pneumatology of Williams in which several things became clear. Firstly, that the Spirit was not a stopgap, filling in a space left by the ascended Christ, but was the presence and immediacy of God-with-us. Secondly, that the Spirit was the principle of unity between the Father and Son and so was that which enabled our participation in that very relation. Language about the Spirit as a person of the Trinity, as a centre of the divine life emphasises that the Spirit has its own distinct share in the work of salvation. That work was to be found in the way in which the Spirit continually breaks open the given so that it can be perpetually rediscovered and refashioned in an endlessly changing world. In one way this makes the recognition of the life of the Spirit outside of the *Ekklesia* more difficult, for what the Spirit is not, is a generalised divine presence, somewhat akin to ‘The Force’ in a Star Wars film! The Spirit is a person of the Trinity (though of course beyond our language of personhood), which for us means the drawing deeper into the self-giving love of Father and Son. At the very least it is the Christian narrative that most truthfully describes and is a sign of that relation, which as we shall go on to discuss means that there cannot be anything other than some kind of exclusivity about Christian claims. Yet, as Williams immersion in the world of eastern Orthodoxy taught him, the life of the Spirit is not there simply to see, it can only find itself reflected in the faces of persons, which is also to say recognising the face of Christ in other people. And if Christ is not the possession of the Church, then we should not be surprised to see his reflection, in the life of the Spirit, alive across the whole world. We are brought into encounter with Father and Son through the Spirit. To speak in such terms is, as Williams acknowledges, to hold two things together:

One is the insight that the Spirit is never other than the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and the other is that the Spirit's work, presence and transforming power is not simply confined to those who profess the name of Jesus Christ.²⁵

What this means we shall now explore by returning to Williams' reflections on the thought of Raymundo Pannikar.

Pannikar and the Trinitarian Structure of Reality

Williams summarises Pannikar's thought as suggesting that the Trinitarian intuition is the most fundamental characteristic of reality. In the previous chapter we had a glimpse of Pannikar's thought in which, as Williams sees it, the key is the relation between the second and third terms of the Trinity between which there is unceasing interaction. What Pannikar resists in that relation is the subordination of the Spirit to the Logos; the Logos does not exhaust Being, for the *is* of Being is free and that freedom is the Spirit. The logos tells us what Being is, but it does not define it in advance. The reality of existence is, therefore, not to be reduced to what is graspable, either conceptually or structurally. Instead, Logos one might say accompanies Life and tells us what it is, but the *is-ness* of Life, of Being which is the life of the Spirit, is the freedom of Being to be what it is. We are again reminded of our previous chapter in which Williams showed a fundamental commitment to the person and work of the Spirit as an eternally generating centre of the divine life in itself, a life not simply identical with 'Father' and 'Son'. The freedom of Being to be what it is, is to be understood as gift, as the never ending renewal of life, which by its nature cannot be determined in advance of that life. That Being cannot be reduced to Logos Williams therefore suggests is also to acknowledge that:

²⁵ *Of things to come*, p. 42.

A unified theory of religion is not going to be possible; neither traditional Christian exclusivist nor the ordinary variety of liberal pluralism can be defended.²⁶

For Williams the attraction of Pannikar's thought is that whilst it is committed to believing that reality is constituted in certain ways, i.e. it involves an ontology, yet its generating Trinitarian centre can be summarised by saying that *difference matters*, so that:

The variety of the world's forms as experienced by human minds does not conceal an absolute oneness to which perceptible difference is completely irrelevant.²⁷

The world's pluralism, for Pannikar, reveals neither a fragmented reality in which (religious) positions are so conditioned and contained by their context that nothing more can be said from beyond each one, or between each of them. Nor is there a position which is so unconditioned by its context, from its actual taking shape in history, that we can see it distinctly from its history in a way which would enable it to colonise and absorb all other positions. As Williams puts it:

In human terms, this is to say that, from the standpoint of history, we cannot articulate in a theory the meaning or pattern of history.²⁸

Any unifying structure and intelligibility cannot be discerned independently of actual change and development, of differentiation and of growth. There is no place from which the King can see what is actually going on. The blind men groping around the

²⁶ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 169.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 169.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

strange reality before them do in fact see, and what they see is the whole, but from their particular perspective. To change metaphors, each perspective is a window through which the whole is encountered, but encountered in *this* particular way.

Pannikar as such distinguishes between the concrete and the universal and on the other hand, the particular and the general. A concrete reality is in some sense the representative of the whole, here and now, in this particular way. So, for example, here is this particular house, (the concrete), yet here too is 'home' (the universal). In this particular house the universal is the entirety of concrete reality 'insofar as it centres upon a single point that cannot itself be abstracted or represented'.²⁹ The universal is incarnated in the concrete. The particular and the general on the other hand look to isolated phenomena and to the abstraction of structure and intelligibility. That for Pannikar is a particularly Western tendency, in which a mechanistic universe is broken up into parts, and indeed he refers to such a scheme as *pars in toto* (part in the whole), as opposed to the concrete/universal which is *pars pro toto* (part for the whole).³⁰

Williams paraphrases Pannikar's thought by saying that a concrete reality offers us recognition, it is a form taken by a universal energy or process which allows a certain recognition and resonance, (this house is someone's home) but which cannot be reduced to this or that, to a definitive explanation. Each complex moment or event is encountered here, at this particular point, in which a whole pattern is embodied, so that as Williams says:

²⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

³⁰ Raymundo Pannikar, 'The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. by J. Hick and P. Knitter (London: SCM, 1987), p. 107.

The individual reality or situation is like a single chord abstracted from a symphony: it can be looked at in itself, but only with rather boring results, since what it is there and then is determined by the symphony. What it is *is* the symphony at that juncture.³¹

Hence the impatience Williams has with a pluralism that assumes a common ground upon which the particular structure of any one religious tradition is built, for even if such commonality could be discerned, any such universal truths would always be embedded in the specific texture of any one tradition and so ‘the *reasons* given for affirming the universal truths will vary’.³² Those reasons emerge out of history, the process of learning through change and conflict; their intelligibility bound up with a language that expresses a narrative with which it makes sense of itself. Every religious tradition, like Christianity itself, has foundational events, stories, myths and texts that shape and re-shape the ongoing interpretation, offering different disciplines of life and practice, in which the concrete and universal form a perpetual interplay. As such:

We cannot avoid asking how a particular system of belief is ‘pressured’ into existence, how what is claimed as a truth is learned.³³

Hence William’s insistence that religious traditions are not particular instances of a genus, in which each offer competing answers to the same questions, and so seek to conquer the same territory. They are different responses to different questions, offering their own complex map of story and ritual, which makes implicit and explicit claims ‘about what is the fullest or most effective way to secure and understand

³¹ Ibid., pp. 169-170.

³² Rowan Williams, ‘Pluralism – Public and Religious’ in Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 129.

³³ Ibid., p. 130.

contact between humanity and the sacred'.³⁴ This, as he points out, also involves claims as to how the 'sacred' may relate toward us.

Christendom, Christianity and Christianess

Plurality offers no perspective outside of itself, but it does call for us to look harder and deeper at the movement of which our situation is a moment. That moment for us, here and now, is for Pannikar that the gospel has moved from 'Christendom', through 'Christianity' to 'Christianness' and is a moment that Williams recognises and works with. Christendom was a civilisation (to be a Christian was to be a member of it), in which the Church was institutionalised and generated a mythology around which culture revolved. The collapse of that ecclesiastical-geographical structure gave way to 'Christianity', to belonging to a religion amongst many (and none) and so to an emphasis on faith (as opposed to Christendom's 'belief'). However, the moment we find ourselves living in here and now, which is to say radical pluralism in a global village, refashions the 'Christic fact'³⁵ into generating the perspective of 'Christianness', which Williams sees as meaning that:

Being a Christian now is going to be more a matter of living out a distinctive witness to the possibilities of human community than of pre-occupation with self-identity and the public and corporate level.³⁶

Christianness is for Williams a commitment to, and a confidence in, the human future as being capable of displaying what is given to us in Christ, which as Pannikar

³⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

³⁶ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 170.

suggests is to say ‘Christianity simply incarnates the primordial and original traditions of humankind’.³⁷

Williams goes on to add his own distinctive voice to Pannikar’s proposals. We should not be surprised to hear that voice drawing us back to two fundamental aspects of Williams own theology; history and the ongoing creation of a new sort of humanity. As favourable as Williams is toward Pannikar’s thought, he does find a weakness in its presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity as a *given* without asking the (very ‘Williams-esque’) questions of how did such a doctrine come to be, and what was the process of its own production? Such questions involve the discernment of how, in the actual events of Christian origins, the relation of Logos and Spirit came to be understood. Understanding how this pattern emerged, suggests Williams, helps to show that Christianness is not a contradiction of ‘Christendom’ and ‘Christianity’, but continues to require them.

That production of meaning (learning about learning) is encountered particularly in the New Testament, especially in Paul and John. The name, Jesus Christ, brings into relief two things, both of which run through the whole of William’s thought and this thesis. *Christ* is a word which points us to a potential future for all people whilst *Jesus* locates the generating source of that future as embodied in a particular person and series of events. As we saw in Chapter three, William’s Christology speaks of *Krisis* and *Ekklesia*. One might paraphrase Williams in saying that the death of Jesus on a cross was the crucifixion of all forms of self-referential and self-enclosed religious language. The resurrection opens the future for a new people, a new Israel, whose borders came to be quickly seen as nothing less than the whole of humanity itself. The Christian community is therefore connected not just to Jesus the Christ, but its

³⁷ Pannikar, *Jordan Tiber Ganges*, p. 102.

members to one another in a new way precisely because of their relation to Jesus Christ. The Risen Lord has not only provided an example of holiness which is to be imitated, but has created (and continues in the Spirit to create) a community which is a re-creation of humanity itself, the *Ekklesia*. The most fundamental image of this is that of the Body, in which each part needs and is dependent upon the other. It is through the relationship between each member that the Body is built up and in which each member grows into what Williams calls a 'Christ-shaped future'.³⁸ The uniqueness and difference between the members of the one Body are crucial, their own specific concrete reality is indispensable for the flourishing of that organic whole, so that 'the fullness of Christ's presence is, in history, the entire ensemble of Christian stories'.³⁹

In other words Williams detects in the New Testament the endless interplay between Logos and Pneuma, in which the creative activity of God has two irreducible moments:

The establishing in the life of Jesus of a unifying point of reference, and the necessary unfinished ensemble of human stories drawn together and given shape in relation to Jesus.⁴⁰

Spoken with Pannikar's voice what we hear is that the pattern and meaning of Logos, which is decisively embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, does not exhaust Being, but is eternally being realised in history, in the life of the Spirit. To hear Williams own distinctive voice is to recognise that the divine nature of Jesus is recognised in his summoning of the whole world into a new unity and intelligibility, but which in its

³⁸ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 172.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 172.

actual concrete existence is always incomplete, always in a process of re-learning its own self-understanding, always unpredictable:

The fullness of Christ is always to be discovered, never there already in a conceptual pattern that explains and predicts everything; it is the fullness of Christ that is to be discovered, a unity that holds together around this one story.⁴¹

Thus the theological importance of history in this context is to recognise that there was no unitary movement called Christianity, which could be parred down to a conceptual scheme.

The *Ekklesia* is rather a space that God clears away in which human beings can begin to learn and live in a Christ-like way. The *Ekklesia* is not simply a boat from which to fish for other individuals in order to secure their eternal salvation, which is what one might describe as the anxiety of the exclusivist. Nor is it one religious symbol amongst many other culturally incommensurable religious symbol systems, which may be a description of the paralysis of a pluralism that merely offers toleration. For Williams:

It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe.⁴²

⁴¹ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 173.

⁴² Rowan Williams, 'The Christian Priest Today',
<<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php>>

Yet the language of 'space' and 'being a place' for the *Ekklesia* all too easily can collapse into being a territory that requires defense as well as expansion (Chrisendom), or become a finalised scheme that simply rejects or colonises other religious schemes (Christianity). To this William's theology constantly returns us to what I have called the *primal wound* of Christ, whereby we are very sharply reminded that to be Christ and to be where Christ is, is to stay awake in Gethsemane. It is to live in the self-emptying relation between Father and Son in which trust and self-giving love come unprotected and undefended. The concrete starting point of the narrative of Jesus Christ found here in this time and place is the enactment of God in a very specific locality. Yet, paradoxically, it is only through this critical fulfilment that:

We can lay hold on the idea of a global testing of our religious words and desires, as historical religious behaviour is confronted by the historical enactment of God's presence, by the eschatological.⁴³

So the nature of the pluralism that Pannikar is advocating rules out any underlying structure that is separable from its historical particularity. For Christians, this means that the incarnation of the Logos is not an assertion of either privilege or exclusivity, but as Williams paraphrases him, 'the centre of that network of relations (implicit and explicit) in which a new humanity is to be created'.⁴⁴

Williams therefore suggests that the purpose of any particular inter-faith encounter is to find ways in which human co-operation involving both challenge and nurture is cultivated, yet which is 'in some way unified by relation to that form of human liberty and maturity made concrete in Jesus'.⁴⁵ For Williams this involves resistance, both

⁴³ Williams, 'Finality of Christ', p. 100.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴⁵ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 174.

cultural and political, to the homogenisation of human beings, which in our present situation is generated by the market or by an omnipotent state (or religious hierarchy). This is exactly the resistance which the eternal mutuality and reciprocity between Spirit and Logos grounds. Christians have learned this relation in and through particular events (in history) that form the process of its own production and which, therefore, offer what is not recognised or on offer in other religious contexts. Precisely because of the specific nature of the story of Jesus and the *krisis* of religious language and understanding it generated, the Christian may legitimately argue that ‘this brings to light what is otherwise not recognised or “thematized” in other contexts (that is, not named and explored in its own right, not articulated as a goal)’.⁴⁶

The *primal wound of Christ*, in which the Church looks to the resurrected life of a condemned man offers, for Williams, the world of religious language both affirmations and questions, a yes and a no, ‘shaped by the conviction that the stature of Christ is what defines the most comprehensive future for humankind’.⁴⁷ It offers it as a vision, as a *telos*, but one that has been shaped by that particular narrative of conflict between the freedom of God and the failure of religious language and power to be fully open to its own convictions. Again, what that *telos* looks like we cannot say, for the life of the Spirit in perpetual relation to the Logos means, as Pannikar would say, that Being cannot be reduced to consciousness and as Williams would translate, that the meaning of Logos can only be revealed in the unpredictable imitation of Jesus in the endless stories of (all) human beings. Williams does suggest that the narrative of Jesus and the practice that it generated offers a unifying point in the diversity of religious and political struggles ‘for human integrity without denying

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

or “colonising” their own history and expression’.⁴⁸ The Christian tradition, for the Christian, offers an interpretative catalyst that identifies, draws out that which is analogous in other religious traditions to the building up of the common life, which is the Kingdom, incarnated in the Body of Christ. This is what that Body has to offer the worlds of religious language.

Trinitarian pluralism rests on the confidence and trust in the absolute source, which is the ground of all reality that acts as both Logos and Spirit, which in turn leads us to say that there is no underlying structure that is in principle separable from historical particularity. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus encounter each other *as* Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and Hindus. For the Christian, this means that *the primal wound* of Jesus Christ draws them continually back to their identity as not being located in a territory (Christendom) nor as system of ideas competing with others in a global religious market (Christianity), it is rather:

The place in the world that is the place of Jesus the anointed, and what it is that becomes possible in that place.⁴⁹

To be in that place is to witness to the possibility and hope of human community and flourishing in which there are no victims, for its vision does not exclude any one part of humanity for it to succeed. The generating and sustaining source of that vision is the historical narrative of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, whose Spirit animates the Church, which is the continuation of His Body on earth. For Pannikar and so too for Williams, the Christian:

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 175.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Christian Identity*, p. 71.

Works on the 'christic' vision for the human good, engaging with adherents of other traditions without anxiety, defensiveness or proselytism, claiming neither an 'exclusivist' perspective invalidating others nor an 'inclusivist' absorption of other perspectives into his or her own, nor yet a 'pluralist' meta-theory, locating all traditions on a single map and relativizing their concrete life.⁵⁰

A short visit to Cairo and Islamabad

So what would this theology of the religious other and interfaith encounter look like?

We shall now briefly explore the response to those questions in two addresses

Williams made to an Islamic audience.

Arguably Christianity and Islam have had a somewhat strained and violent relationship precisely because, *prima facie*, they seem to share the same sort of theological space. Monotheistic, scripturally centred with a desire, an imperative, to convert others, may seem that they offer competing answers to the same questions. Allah or God, Muhammad or Jesus, the Qu'ran or the Bible? That at least is the trap we easily fall into. It will be remembered that for Williams this kind of scheme is profoundly unhelpful, for it suggests that religion is a genus of which Islam and Christianity are species and so between which there is a battle for territory. Williams' approach is rather different; religions are not competing answers, but responses to different sorts of questions that have a history. So how might a Christian begin a conversation with a Muslim?

It would of course be impossible for Williams to accept Islam's self-understanding in which it sees itself as the final revelation of God, given in the Qur'an, that abrogates

⁵⁰ Williams, 'Trinity and Pluralism', p. 170.

and corrects all others. The difficulty in such a claim for Williams is not simply that it sweeps aside Christological orthodoxy, but that its understanding of revelation is very much from above. In such a theology the Qur'an *has no history*; it is simply and straightforwardly *given*. The personality of the Prophet Muhammad is, in Islamic understanding, irrelevant to the revelation; he is the vehicle through which it is transmitted. In order to maintain the purity of the text as being God's word, there can be no ambiguity of roles between the messenger and the message. The nature of revelation as such is a point of profound difference between the Christian and Muslim. To begin here with a finalised Islamic ontology would lead simply to misunderstanding and argument. What Williams does is to look to the historical, to the question that lies below the surface, which means to recognise the absolute commitment of the Qur'an to resist *shirk*, idolatry, and it is from here that he is able to begin a conversation with the Islamic tradition. As he writes:

[The Qu'ran] is like OT prophecy in this way at least, that it represents a *God-motivated* protest against idolatry. The passionate hostility to idolatry and shirk, associating what God isn't with God, seems to me to belong to a recognisable family of *God-driven* moments in the world. And the uncomfortable subsidiary point for Christians is that Muhammad clearly didn't see the Christianity he knew as anything other than another form of idolatry and confusion.⁵¹

Muhammad resists both idolatry and Christianity and so Williams asks:

⁵¹ Personal correspondence, (my italics).

How does the self-communication of God take shape in such a context? Is there a way of seeing the Qu'ran as the shape that would be taken by a divine prompting in the context of these constraints?⁵²

This is not the place to fully explore such a question, but what can be noted is the creative tension that Williams recognises between 'divine prompting', what previously I have described as the pressure of God, and the historical. Williams suggests that:

There may be something to be learned from thinking about other faiths in terms of what they are *resisting* in the name of God⁵³

Tawhid, for the Muslim is the name of that resistance; the insistence that God is one and that there can be no second reality associated with the divine. In a speech given to an audience in Cairo, Williams readily accepts and expands on this core Islamic commitment. He does so by drawing on the Christian past, found in the Alexandrian neighbours of his Cairo audience. For them God is the name of a kind of life, 'eternal and self-sufficient life, always active, needing nothing'.⁵⁴ We hear echoes of Williams' insistence that the transcendence of God, the way in which we speak of God's difference, lies in His autonomy from the world's narrative:

What is good and just is rooted in eternal truth, in the nature of God, who is what he is quite independently of what the world thinks.⁵⁵

⁵² Personal correspondence.

⁵³ Personal correspondence.

⁵⁴ 'Christians and Muslims before the One God'; an address given at Al-Azhar al-Sharimath, Cairo on 11 September 2004. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1053> p.1

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.3

Williams acknowledges Islam's difficulty with Christian Trinitarian language in which Jesus appears to be a second reality added to God and that he is the biological Son of God. Returning to Alexandria, he assures the audience that these were exactly the problems that those Christians, with their commitment to unity of God, sought to avoid. What Christians learned was that the self-sufficient divine life is lived eternally in three ways made known in the history of the Hebrew people and the life of Jesus, and was understood as 'a source of life, an expression of life and a sharing of life',⁵⁶ each of which can be thought of as a centre of mind and love without dividing the divine unity. The point being that Williams, whilst understanding that Muslims may still find this a source of disagreement, is, as Clarke says, nevertheless asking his Muslim audience:

To consider themselves untroubled by the doctrine of the Triune God, newly expressed in terms of love and life, and in fact to find in it the most beautiful expression of what they desire.⁵⁷

Yet, if by the name God we mean that life which is self-sufficient and autonomous of any human narrative then, as Williams goes on to say, there are profound ethical implications for us all. As Clarke points out,⁵⁸ without naming them as the teachings of Jesus, Williams draws from God's transcendence the need to love our enemies in the face of violence:

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.5

⁵⁷ Greg Clarke, 'The Beauty of God in Cairo and Islamabad: Rowan Williams as Apologist' in *On Rowan Williams, Critical essays*, ed. by Russel Matheson (Oregon: Cascade, 2009), p. 196.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

We may rightly want to defend ourselves and one another – our people, our families, the weak and the vulnerable among us. But we are not forced to act in revengeful ways, holding up a mirror to the terrible acts done to us [...] and we fail to show our belief in the living God who always requires of us justice and goodness.⁵⁹

Referring to the events on 9/11, in which Williams himself was present, as Clarke says:

By standing with his audience (using the pronoun ‘we’ repeatedly), rather than indicting them or suggesting that they are somehow responsible for his ‘tribe’s’ suffering, Williams in fact models the very non-vengeance he is proclaiming.⁶⁰

His speech leads the audience to the shared truth that whenever anybody refuses to act in violent revenge, ‘that person bears witness to the true God’.⁶¹

The assumption in the speech is that his Muslim listeners will be able to understand and find a deep resonance in his words. Not only with reference to a shared grammar of God, but in the vision of a shared community in which revenge and violence are seen as the narrative of the world and not those who worship the One God. There is a profound sense in the speech that what Christianity tries to embody (however badly) does not contradict in any way the ‘question’ (as Williams sees it) at the heart of Islam in its resistance to idolatry. What is more that insistence upon the unity and transcendence of God finds its expression in a vision of a non-violent and non-

⁵⁹ *ibid* p.5

⁶⁰ Clarke, *Beauty of God*, p. 197.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 197.

competitive sociality, which Christians have learned to see in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Williams takes a different approach in an address to a religious and academic audience in Islamabad.⁶² Here, he asks his audience to imagine what it is like to be a Christian by observing what happens in a Church and in a Christian community. It is not a discussion of the finer points of Trinitarian theology, but an exploration of Christian dogma through the patterns of liturgy. Look at what Christians do together, he says, and begin to see there the meaning of Christian identity. He takes his listeners from the Sunday gathering, through baptism and Eucharist, the learning from and exposition of the Scriptures, the importance of both communal and private prayer and the formation of community shaped and formed by divine initiative. He makes it clear that the generating heart of this is the narrative of Jesus Christ in which ‘the whole of his human life is the direct effect of God’s action working in him at every moment’.⁶³ Because of Jesus, Williams explains, Christians can speak to God in exactly the same way that Jesus did, because the Holy Spirit, which animates him, is given to us also.

Again, as in the address in Cairo, Williams is careful to show that such language and liturgy does not undermine the divine unity. What is also noticeable in this address is the way in which the character of the historical is fully acknowledged. The nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection have led to various ways of understanding its meaning, yet ‘there is no way of saying this correctly’.⁶⁴ Rather those events are things that are constantly and perpetually brought into the present, so that Jesus, who is eternally

⁶² Rowan Williams, ‘What is Christianity?’ a lecture given at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, November 23, 2005.

<<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org>>983.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

alive, ‘calls people to be with him just as he did in his life on earth’.⁶⁵ In other words the Christian community goes on learning its identity. This reflects the nature of the Church’s scriptures, which ‘unlike the Qur’an [...] is not a text delivered in a brief space of time to one person’.⁶⁶ Rather they have been written over more than a thousand years, contain different voices, and yet find a deep unity of thought, ‘once it is agreed that the life of Jesus is the centre of the picture and that it makes sense of the rest’.⁶⁷ What that means is that God has not dictated these scriptures, but that rather God works with human agency so that He ‘works with and in [the authors’] human minds to communicate his purpose, to tell us what we need to know in order to be set free from our mistakes and sins.’⁶⁸ What is more, Christians have spent much energy and time on understanding how these scriptures were formed and composed. Some Christians find the results of such enquiry threatening, but the majority ‘accept the results of scholarly study as confirming the idea that the Bible tells the one story in several different voices’.⁶⁹ Williams is quite clear in his presentation that the Christian faith emerges slowly, requires a constant re-reading of itself as it encounters the new, and often fails to live up to its own commitments. There is no sense of Christian triumphalism or of criticism of Islam. Yet, surely, the lecture leaves the audience asking many questions about itself. How would a Muslim present Islam? What are the foundational commitments of Islam and how are they learned and understood in history? How does Islam understand failure? For Williams, inter-faith encounter requires honesty on all sides, but its core witness is to present to the world

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

of religious languages, the question of God which the cross and resurrection embody in Christ.

In conclusion

For Williams, the space in the world that God creates in and through Christ, has its symbolic form in the Church, ‘but its life is not identical with the institutional reality of the Church’.⁷⁰ Christianess is a commitment to working toward a Christ-like humanity, but which does not require the ‘goal of including the entire human race in a single religious institution’.⁷¹ In Chapter three we saw how for Williams the risen Christ comes as both friend *and stranger* and is, therefore, never in the grasp of the Church. In other words, the Church offers Christ to the world, yet it offers that which it does not *possess*. To speak of the Holy Spirit as that which draws the Church into the relation between Father and Son is to be taken into the garden of Gethsemane, where the Church’s identity and security are found in the powerlessness of the cross. Thus:

Trinitarian theology becomes not so much an attempt to say the last word about the divine nature as a prohibition against would-be final accounts of divine nature and action.⁷²

Christianity, precisely because of the strange gospel it has learned and continues to learn to preach speaks of the divine as being more than ground and source of life beyond any imagining. Yet the historical form of Jesus, who *is* the image of God, ‘does not exhaust the divine’.⁷³ The relation of Spirit to Logos means that we cannot

⁷⁰ Williams, *Trinity and Pluralism*, p. 177.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

in history come to a full stop before which all that can be said has been said. The Spirit resists our perpetual temptation to find in the past an already achieved form of Christ which requires repetition. The Spirit blows where it wills, *yet* it does so in order to bring us ‘to account by the critical memory and presence of Jesus’ human identity.’⁷⁴ Williams suggests that there is an endlessly self-corrective movement in Trinitarian grammar that prevents the freezing of any one of the terms of the divine life into an object which then can be seized. It is this grammar that Christianity offers, and which it alone can offer, to the various worlds of religious language and indeed non-religious language, so that:

Being Christian is being involved in witness to and work for a comprehensive human community because of what happened to specific human beings and their relationships in connection with the ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus – those happenings which have been held to force upon us the reconstructed vision of God as source and Logos and Spirit.⁷⁵

God can only be known and witnessed to in a human form of life in which the relation of Logos and Spirit is one of equilibrium and the Church is the sign and focal point of that movement, yet:

What it *will* finally be is not something theory will tell us, but something only discoverable in the expanding circles of encounter with what is not the Church.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 179.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 180.

There is of course exclusivity in this vision, for it is generated from the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth. There can be no other starting point for Christian identity other than here. It is not possible to work from ideas or principles from above and carefully work your way down to this point. Nor would it be clear, as Williams notes,⁷⁷ to see how any other point in human culture could lead to this sort of theological perspective without reference to the originating events of the Christian narrative. Yet it is not, as we have repeatedly seen, an exclusivism of a finalised system of ideas. Nor is it a territory of whatever kind that needs to be expanded and defended. *Creation ex nihilo* and the theology of hypostatic union both speak of a God who is not in competition with his creation or humanity. Christianity, if it is to be faithful to these fundamental commitments, cannot be in competition with anything else. Rather:

The place of Jesus is open to all who want to see what Christians see and to become what Christians are becoming. And no Christian believer has in his or her possession some kind of map of where exactly the boundaries of that place are to be fixed, or a key to lock others out or in.⁷⁸

The exclusive claim of Christianity is that it is here in this place where Jesus leads us to, this space that Jesus constitutes, is where the healing of the world fully takes place. It is here that sins are forgiven and ‘adoption into God’s intimate presence promised’.⁷⁹ This has been learned in and through the historical struggles of the Church, in its endless hermeneutical spiral between originating event and ongoing interpretation. Other religious traditions will not have this perspective at their centre, and Williams is clear that:

⁷⁷ Williams, ‘Finality of Christ’, p. 102.

⁷⁸ Williams, ‘Christian Identity’, p. 72.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

What I want to say about those other views is not that they are in error but that they leave out what matters most in human struggle, yet I know that this will never be obvious to those others.⁸⁰

What the Christian faith offers the world is not the correct description of God accurately contained in doctrinal formula, but the most truthful and hopeful way of being human, as we stand under the judgement of the cross and resurrection. The exclusive narrative of Jesus of Nazareth is what the Church brings to the world, yet that very narrative does not claim exclusivity but a radical openness and receptivity to the movement of the Spirit so that:

When others appear to have arrived at a place where forgiveness and adoption are sensed and valued, even when these things are not directly spoken of in the language of another faith's mainstream reflection, are we to say that God has not found a path for himself?⁸¹

Yet it may seem to some that the commitment, in our time, to *Christianess*, is something of a dilution of the Christian faith, that it is merely a more sophisticated version of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism's 'the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.' Some too may believe it is not that far from John Hick's language of 'Reality-centredness'; the recognition of the moral highest common factor amongst the world's religions. However, that would be to diminish the Christological nature of William's commitment. In his paper 'The Unity of Christian

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 73.

Truth', Williams instead suggests that the generating centre for the unity of Christian truth is found in a conception of the unity of humanity, so that:

The conviction that there is a common hope and a common vocation for human beings, such that the welfare or salvation of one section of humanity cannot be imagined as wholly different from or irrelevant to that of the rest of the race.⁸²

In this paper Williams explores the implications of such a commitment both within the Christian tradition across the centuries and between Israel and Christianity. The question of whether it is the 'same God' spoken of cannot be answered 'apart from the question, "Is it the same hope?" or "is it the same pattern of holy life?"'⁸³ In other words 'God' cannot be reduced to an identifiable object that is either present or absent in any particular discourse as Chapter two made clear. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus offers the unifying point in and through attention to the diversity of human life, and human life is judged and brought into unity through this reference to the particularity of Christ. The 'memory' of Jesus and Christian anthropology give shape and definition to each other, so that the memory is not ever simply a recollection of a past figure, nor the humanity of the Church 'never simply an optimistic moral project'.⁸⁴ It is the interaction between the two that constitutes the Church's mission in the world, both in terms of the judgement and hope it brings, not least to the worlds religious plurality.

Williams clearly sees the saving activity of God in the faces of people across the religious divide. Yet we are still left with a question that haunts many of the

⁸² Williams, 'Unity of Christian Truth', *OCT* p. 17.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

discussions about religious pluralism: are followers of other religious traditions saved *because* of their faith or *despite* it? As far as I have been able to discover, he has not written directly on this question and so I can only draw out what is implicit his thought. The first point to be made is that Williams would probably find the question itself unhelpful. His insistence upon the cross as that which is the judgement upon all of our religious systems and language, as that which deconstructs our easy answers, this utterly strange revelation of God tells us that it is *all* despite; salvation comes as pure gift from a source and ground, which is radically free from our narratives. To turn it into a system, an algorithm, or a *theory* of atonement would be to immunise ourselves against its saving power, which paradoxically is not about power at all.

Yet neither does this mean that anything goes, so that all forms of religious endeavour are as hopeful or as delusory as the next. Something has been given to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is not an all-encompassing conceptual scheme that provides answers to questions yet to be asked.

It is because of the strange and disturbing story of God-with-us in Jesus of Nazareth that some kind of recognition can take place as we encounter non-Christians. But it would be odd indeed if Williams thought of this recognition as being autonomous of the *totalitat* of that person's context. For he is quite clear in his writings that human beings are not discrete individuals who create and are masters of their own identity and meaning. And just as we cannot understand a religious tradition apart from its own specific history of learning and conflict, so too every person is formed and shaped by the cultural and linguistic tradition into which they have been born and which has shaped them. If as Christians we recognise in the faces of others the light and life of God it is because the tradition, from which they cannot be excavated, has helped them to this place. Exactly how, I think cannot be answered, nor would I

suspect Williams would try to do so. Perhaps like his reflections of the trial of Christ in Luke, we are reminded that ‘God lies in the connections I cannot make’.⁸⁵

The synthesis that I have constructed out of the various strands in Rowan Williams thought provides a window through which it is possible to see and engage with the incredible religious diversity of the world. Being a window means that it has allowed us to look from the other side too and what has come into view are the foundational commitments in the theological thinking of Williams, which form the Trinitarian core. Yet more than this, what has emerged is an understanding of the nature of the Christian faith that offers a structure for understanding not just the religious other, but for the mission of the Church as a whole. The relation between the Logos and the Spirit, between the given and the new, calls the Church to pay attention to the present moment, which as we have seen is for Williams (following Pannikar) a commitment to Christianess. How might this help the Church of England in its current situation to understand its nature and mission?

British society can be understood as having three dimensions to it: It is nominally and sometime explicitly Christian, it is secular, and it is also multi-cultural and therefore multi-faith. These three aspects are in a constant state of flux in relation to each other. Like the tectonic plates beneath the earth’s surface, they can cause sudden tremors. Sometimes minor ones, such as how the Church responds to the changes in the secular law regarding same-sex marriage. Sometimes the tensions between the dimensions lead to a more violent and disturbing outburst, such as the murder of a soldier in South London by ‘radicalised’ Muslims. As the Church of England navigates the

⁸⁵ Williams, *Christ on Trial*, p. 56.

enormous changes that have taken place in society in the last four decades it still falls prey to a dilemma outlined by Jurgen Moltmann when he wrote that:

The Christian life of theologians, churches and human beings is faced more than ever today with a double crisis; the crisis of relevance and the crisis of identity.⁸⁶

As Moltmann goes on to argue, these two crises are complementary. The more the Church and its ministers attempt to become relevant the more deeply they are drawn into a crisis of their own identity so that:

The more they attempt to assert their identity in traditional dogmas, rights and moral notions, the more irrelevant and unbelievable they become.⁸⁷

Moltmann was of course writing at a time when the seemingly endless secularisation of society had caught the Church off-guard. John Kent⁸⁸ suggests secularisation should not be understood as meaning that society has become consciously atheistical, but rather that the Church as an institution and the Christian faith as a public mode of self-understanding has moved somewhere from the centre to somewhere near the edge of society and culture. As this process hastened the Church fell into Moltmann's dilemma: either it had to change and adopt the values and language of society in order to remain relevant in the public sphere, or it retreated into a religious space in which it could preserve its identity but at the expense of social relevance. It seemed that either it learned to speak the language of culture or it just spoke to itself.

⁸⁶ Jurgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God*. (SCM Press: London) 1973 p. 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁸ John. Kent, *The End of the Line*. (SCM Press: London, 1978) pp 105-110

In Pannikarian terms the Church was caught between Christendom (keeping hold on to space in which its identity remained intact and secure) and Christianity (becoming a belief system in competition with other systems). The situation has become more complicated since Moltmann's diagnosis in 1974. Most notably the 9/11 attacks on New York firmly placed religion in the public arena once again but this time it was the questions which multi-cultural/faith issues raised.

It will be remembered that the origins of this thesis were found in my experience as a university chaplain. In my MFS project,⁸⁹ I interviewed several other chaplains to discuss the Christian nature of their work, and what emerged was that Moltmann's dilemma continued. The more evangelically minded chaplains tended to concentrate on building up a vibrant, but usually small group of committed Christians with the emphasis on converting other students and staff. The more 'liberal' minded chaplains tended to ally themselves to the student services departments of the university, contributing to the life of the university by supporting the welfare programme. The former group of chaplains had a very strong sense of their Christian identity, but at the cost of their relevance to the daily life and work of the institution and of course, vice versa.

What seemed to be happening at the micro-level in the work of the university chaplain may be seen in the macro-life of the Church of England. Falling numbers in congregations, a market place of belief systems, and perhaps greater hostility toward religion apparently continues to offer the Church the choice of either identity or relevance, the question of same-sex marriage being a case in point. Same sex couples can now get married and so the Church of England finds itself in an acute dilemma.

⁸⁹ The title of which was, *How do Chaplains understand the Christian nature of their work?*

Formally, it retains a traditional attitude to marriage as that between a man and a woman yet it is notably out of step with much public opinion. Does it keep its Christian identity and retain 'doctrinal purity' or should it become more relevant to the society in which it ministers by adopting its values? The failure in the reduction of a complex issue to this kind of choice is theological and one which William's Trinitarian pluralism reveals. For the root of Moltmann's dilemma is in fact the severance of Logos and Spirit.

The Gospel is not about the creation and defence of an identity which is fixed in time and space and which needs to be protected from the onslaughts of a liberal society. Neither is it a set of beliefs which are in competition with other systems of belief, whether they be secular, scientific or religious. The temptation to retain identity at all costs is one in which Logos has become ossified. It is understood as an already achieved fullness that merely requires numerical expansion. Mission is thus reduced to evangelism and evangelism becomes the need to draw as many individuals into the fold as possible before the Parousia. In such a theological vision, the world is at best irrelevant and at worst the enemy. The imperative is to draw individuals into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, who is understood as the religious solution to the failure of the world. What we hear in this stance are echoes of a revelation from above, in which theology is protected from the conflicts and change of history.

Relevance is the obverse of this image. The world is not the enemy but the salvation of the Christian faith, for it frees it from its unnecessary baggage, which essentially is to say the past. In such a vision of the mission of the Church, it is the Spirit which is key, for it is about the present and the new, and what it uncovers for us is that there is no conflict between the essence of Christianity and the world. Indeed, the world enables the Christian faith to discover what it truly is; the assumption being that the

common good of humanity as understood by the Church and ‘the world’ must be one and the same. Here the echoes are of a revelation from below, in which the present becomes ‘the King’ in our story; the arbiter of what is true and real.

Relevance and identity reduce theology to a dualism between God and the world. It becomes a tug of war in which territory is defended or surrendered. The Trinitarian pluralism of Rowan Williams offers us instead a theological vision in which the world is not the problem to be overcome but the very theatre in which God’s creative work is acted out. Pluralism is not an aspect of this world; it *is* the world and the various religious expressions of humanity an indispensable part of that collage. This of course does not give us an answer to the complex questions facing the Church. It may just enable us to ask the right questions.

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